

Ragwort.



Ragwort is a common wildflower and toxic weed that poses serious risks to livestock but supports pollinators and wildlife.

Scientifically known as *Jacobaea vulgaris* (synonym *Senecio jacobaea*), it is a biennial or sometimes perennial plant native to northern Eurasia and widely distributed as a weed in the UK and other regions. It grows from a rosette of deeply lobed, dark green leaves in its first year to

erect stems up to 1.5–2 meters tall in the second year.

The plant produces bright yellow, daisy-like flowers in dense, flat-topped clusters from July to October, with seeds dispersed by wind due to fluffy hairs. Ragwort can be confused with other yellow wildflowers such as tansy, common fleabane, and smooth hawk's beard.

Ecological Role

Despite its toxicity, ragwort is valuable for wildlife. It supports over 200 invertebrate species, including the cinnabar moth caterpillar, and provides nectar for bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. Its ecological importance makes it a significant plant for biodiversity, especially in gardens where it does not threaten livestock.

Toxicity and Risks

Ragwort contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids, which are toxic to horses, cattle, and other livestock. These compounds cause cumulative liver damage and can be fatal if ingested, whether the plant is green or dried in hay. Poisoning is difficult to detect early, and ingestion of even small amounts can be dangerous. Dogs and humans may also experience health issues if handled improperly. In the UK, ragwort is responsible for an estimated over 700 horse deaths since its listing under the Weeds Act.

Legal Status and Control

Ragwort is classified as an injurious weed under the Weeds Act 1959 and the Ragwort Control Act 2003 in the UK. Landowners are legally required to control its spread on agricultural land, particularly where it poses a risk to grazing animals or forage production. Control measures include:

Manual removal of rosettes in spring and autumn before flowering

Herbicide application following guidance for safe use on conservation sites.

Safe disposal by composting on-site or controlled burning, ensuring seeds do not spread.

Failure to control ragwort can result in fines or prosecution, but demonstrating compliance with recommended control measures can mitigate legal consequences.