

Ragwort

Senecio jacobaea

Family Asteraceae



Identification

- Biennial or perennial plant up to 1.2 m tall.
- Grows in a rosette form in the first year. (Can stay as a rosette for up to 3 years.)
- Bright yellow-golden daisy flowers (summer to autumn) are held in large clusters on up-right, leafy, branched stems.
- Stems are ridged and purplish in colour.
- Parachute-like seeds.
- Leaves on mature plants are deeply divided and are 'raggedy' in appearance.
- Leaf underside often purple.
- Unpleasant smell when plant bruised.



Scattered ragwort infestation. Photo: Landcare Research

Why is it a problem?

Ragwort is toxic to stock. It acts as a cumulative poison that builds rapid fatal toxicity in horses and cattle. In sheep the toxin can take three years to become fatal. The toxin in ragwort eventually causes irreparable liver damage in animals.

If ragwort is included in hay or silage, it still retains its toxic attributes while becoming more palatable to stock and therefore more dangerous.

Ragwort is a prolific seeder producing up to 150 000 seeds per plant (up to 90% can be viable). The seeds are predominantly spread by wind and water but also by stock and in hay.



Ragwort. Photo: Landcare Research

Where is it found?

Ragwort is commonly found on roadsides, riversides and damp pastures. The recent shift in some Canterbury farming practices from dry land farming to dairying has resulted in more irrigation and consequently wetter pastures. These conditions favour ragwort growth. Care is required to prevent ragwort from becoming the same problem that nodding thistle has become in some areas.



Dense ragwort infestation. Photo: Landcare Research



Cinnabar moth caterpillars on ragwort. Photo: S. Crump (DOC)

Control

Mechanical control

Grubbing or pulling is best done when the plant is at a full to late flowering stage when the roots are less likely to re-grow. Any flower heads present should be burnt at a high temperature to destroy any developed seed heads.

Pasture management

It is important to maintain a competitive pasture sward to prevent the establishment of ragwort. Mowing ragwort is not recommended as it encourages the plant to grow multiple stems and makes it more difficult to kill.

Chemical control

Stock should be removed from the area until the sprayed plants have died as ragwort becomes more palatable to stock after spraying. Spot spraying should be carried out before flowering as plants are more difficult to kill following flowering and once seed has been produced.

If considering chemical control, please contact your local farm merchandise supplier for advice on available chemicals and recommendations for application.

Status

Ragwort is a 'containment control plant' in the Canterbury Regional Pest Management Strategy 2005-2015. Land occupiers are required to eradicate infestations from within 40 m of stockwater and irrigation races and property boundaries.



Ragwort plume moths on ragwort. Photo: B. Keenan (ECan)



Ragwort infestation. Photo: B. Keenan (ECan)

Biological control

Several biocontrol agents have been introduced to attack ragwort in New Zealand. The most successful agents to date have been the ragwort flea beetle and the cinnabar moth. Although these insects have established and impacted on ragwort in a number of areas, they have failed to establish in colder sites. Hence the ragwort plume moth and ragwort crown boring moth have recently been introduced (first releases in 2006) as they are more tolerant of cooler climatic conditions and therefore have a greater chance of establishing in areas where the flea beetle and cinnabar moth have struggled. It is mainly the larvae of these insects that cause the most damage to ragwort by eating the foliage, stem and root material.