

Common Ragwort Policy & Advice Note

December 2022

Foreword

Protecting, restoring, and increasing biodiversity is a fundamental priority to safeguard the natural systems on which all life on earth is part of and depends.

With changes to how we produce our food, increasing movement of people and resources, alongside the impacts of climate change and other pressures, there are rising and new threats for nature which require our collective action and response to the Climate and Nature Emergency.

This Ragwort Policy compliments the South Gloucestershire Council Plant Biosecurity Policy and Pesticide Policy and sets out how the council assesses and where appropriate controls ragwort on council managed highway verges and public open spaces. Ragwort provides important benefits for biodiversity, however it can be harmful for grazing animals if it is in fodder.

This Ragwort Policy explains how the council assesses, manages, and monitors ragwort on the land it is responsible for. It aims to raise awareness and provide information about ragwort so that the benefits and the risks are understood, and a clear process of assessment and action by the council is set out.



Photo - Small Tortoiseshell butterfly on Common Ragwort

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Part One – Setting the scene

1.1 Introduction

South Gloucestershire Council declared a Climate Emergency in July 2019, recognising that the global climate is in a state of breakdown. We need to urgently prepare for the local impacts of a changing climate, reduce our carbon emissions and protect and restore nature.

We also know that climate change along with other factors is having a significant impact on the health of nature and ecosystems, and that this is a critical part of the wider environmental crisis. For this reason, the council has taken an approach that tackles the nature crisis together with the climate emergency and recognises that we face a [Climate and Nature Emergency](#).

Changing the way we manage our assets and work with our partners and communities will play a key role to help us to tackle this emergency together.

Common Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*), hereafter referred to as 'ragwort', is a native British flowering plant. Ragwort is important for biodiversity and has a long flowering season making it an important nectar source for pollinators. It supports a high number of insect species, 29 of which depend entirely on ragwort for their existence including cinnabar moths, a bee species, hoverflies and a nationally scarce leaf beetle. Pollinating insects are key to life on earth and are fundamental to addressing the ecological emergency. The council seeks to protect and enhance the amount and quality of pollinator habitat and manage its greenspace to provide greater benefits for pollinators as set out in our Pollinator Plan.

Ragwort has been classified under the Weeds Act 1959 as an '*injurious weed*'. This is because it contains pyrrolizidine alkaloids which in high doses can have debilitating or fatal consequences if ingested by horses or other grazing animals. In view of this, ragwort must be controlled where it poses a threat to the health and welfare of grazing animals and the production of feed or forage for animals.

It is important to note that ragwort is unpalatable to animals as a live plant and usually avoided by livestock unless there is no other food source. It does become more palatable when cut and dried when it loses its bitterness, but the toxins remain. Ingesting small amounts of ragwort will not generally cause illness.



Photos: Meadow brown butterfly and Cinnabar moth caterpillar on ragwort

1.2 Purpose

This policy outlines how South Gloucestershire Council will assess, and where appropriate, control the spread of ragwort, and reduce herbicide application when controlling ragwort. This policy is aligned with the council's Pesticide Policy (herbicide is a type of pesticide) and Pollinator Action Plan which sets out how the council is taking action to reduce use of herbicide and increase pollinator habitat.

The Council's Green Infrastructure Strategy 2021 sets out the commitment to reduce the amount of pesticide used on council owned and managed land, and to reduce pesticides within council supply chains.

This policy sets out the legislation relating to ragwort and outlines the benefits of ragwort for biodiversity. It details a flow chart to assess and evaluate the risk of ragwort spreading and evaluating control methods to use where required.

1.3 Legislation & duties

Key legislation relevant to this policy includes:

- [Ragwort Control Act, 2003](#) which has led to Defra's [Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Common Ragwort](#)
- [NERC Act, 2006](#):
Section 40 - all public bodies must have regard for the purpose of conserving biodiversity in the discharge of their normal functions.
- [Weeds Act, 1959](#)

The Weeds Act 1959 and Ragwort Control Act 2003

Under these Acts, landowners are expected to manage ragwort so that it does not spread to adjacent sites.

Common ragwort is one of five species listed under the [Weeds Act 1959](#) as being an injurious weed. An 'injurious weed' is a native species, seen to pose harm to agricultural pasture. Common ragwort contains toxins which can have debilitating or fatal consequences if ingested by horses or other grazing animals.

Under the Weeds Act 1959 the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs can, if satisfied that injurious weeds are growing upon any land, serve a notice requiring the occupier to take action to prevent the spread of those weeds. An unreasonable failure to comply with a notice is an offence.

The Weeds Act 1959 has been amended by the [Ragwort Control Act 2003](#). It gives the Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Common Ragwort evidential status in any proceedings taken under the Weeds Act 1959. This means that a failure to follow this Code is not an offence, but non-compliance may be used as evidence in any legal action.

The Code states that "common ragwort and other ragwort species are native to the British Isles and are therefore an inherent part of our flora and fauna, along with invertebrate and other wildlife they support. The Code does not propose the eradication of common ragwort but promotes a strategic approach to control the spread of common ragwort where it poses a threat to the health and welfare of grazing animals and the production of feed or forage."

The Code of Practice provides guidelines on assessing the risk posed to grazing animals or forage production to determine whether action should be taken to prevent the spread of ragwort to neighbouring land.

This policy will follow Defra's Code of Practice. It does not seek to eradicate common ragwort. However, it is necessary for the occupier of the land to prevent its spread where this presents a high risk of poisoning horses and livestock or spreading to fields used to produce forage.

South Gloucestershire Green Infrastructure (GI) Strategy 2021

The councils GI Strategy 2021 and [Green Infrastructure and Nature Recovery Action Plan](#) includes actions this Ragwort policy will support including:

- Action N9 – Manage our grassland areas to improve nature
- Action N10 – Reduce the use of pesticides

This Ragwort Policy also supports and links to the following policies and actions from the councils GI and Nature Recovery Action Plan including:

- South Gloucestershire Council Pesticides Policy
- South Gloucestershire Council Plant Biosecurity Policy
- South Gloucestershire Verge Management Programme
- South Gloucestershire Grassland Policy
- South Gloucestershire Grazing Policy
- South Gloucestershire Pollinator Action Plan

1.4 Responsibilities

In line with 1.3 above, South Gloucestershire Council has duties and powers for assessing and controlling the spread of ragwort. Typically, this will be confined to high-risk areas where ragwort is growing within 50m of land used for grazing by horses or land used for forage production.

“Protecting and enhancing the environment for future generations is a cross cutting value within the South Gloucestershire Community Strategy and is one of the core values that underpins all our work.” South Gloucestershire Green Infrastructure Strategy 2021.

Whilst South Gloucestershire uses Glyphosate as a weedkiller for specific and controlled purposes, any changes in national policy will be adopted by the council where required and the council will continue to consider latest advice and best practice. In the meantime, the council is reducing usage wherever practicable. By reducing the reliance on herbicides and other pesticides, South Gloucestershire Council is taking important action to reduce the impacts of pesticides and be ready for any future changes in law.

1.5 Benefits of ragwort

The 2007 UK Countryside Survey shows a significant decline in ragwort. South Gloucestershire Council declared a Climate emergency in 2019, reflecting the importance of taking action in response to the dramatic changes we are experiencing in climate and nature. At a time when biodiversity indicators are showing continued stress on habitats, it is time to reevaluate the role of this plant and ensure that ragwort is not eradicated unnecessarily, and further damage of our already fragile biodiversity is avoided.

As a native plant with long flowering season, ragwort is very important for wildlife in the UK. It supports a wide variety of invertebrates, and its long flowering period makes it a major nectar source for many pollinating insects which also pollinate our orchards and crops.

Ragwort is a natural component of many types of unimproved grassland and is used by some invertebrate species that have conservation needs. At least 29 insect species and 14 fungi species are entirely reliant on ragwort and about a third of these insects are scarce or rare. ([Buglife, Insect Fauna in Detail](#)) For example, the distinctive orange and black caterpillar of the cinnabar moth is a common sight on ragwort.

Did you know?

Common ragwort is one of the most frequently visited flowers by butterflies in the UK and more than 200 species of invertebrate have been recorded on it. ([Wildlife Trusts.org](#))

1.6 Current Practice

At the time of writing South Gloucestershire Council currently monitors 30 locations on land it is responsible for where ragwort is known to be growing and aims to treat the ragwort three times per year using chemical herbicide.

In line with best practice the council is reducing it's herbicide usage where practicable. Reviewing current practice and setting out a clear assessment and management decision flow chart regarding ragwort is needed to ensure that management aligns with the councils corporate policies for Pesticides, Plant Biosecurity, Pollinator Action Plan and statutory duties as set out in section 1.3

Part Two – Scope

Ragwort growth on highway verges and public open spaces managed or owned by South Gloucestershire Council is included within the scope of this policy. Land owned or managed by third parties is not included in this policy.

Further information for ragwort management on third party land is available via the toolkit available from the British Horse Society which includes advice on contacting landowners. [Toolkit: Dealing with Ragwort in England | British Horse Society \(bhs.org.uk\)](https://www.bhs.org.uk/toolkit-dealing-with-ragwort-in-england)

Part Three – Practical advice note

This part of the policy details the methodology for South Gloucestershire Council to follow to manage ragwort where necessary in accordance with regulations. It provides a summary of [Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort](#).

Ragwort is a valuable plant for biodiversity and removal of ragwort must only be done when necessary. Risks of ragwort spreading to adjacent sites must be carefully assessed to decide whether removal is required and what is the most appropriate method.

3.1 Assessment of risk

As an owner and occupier of land, the council must inspect land for common ragwort and assess the risks of it affecting adjoining land. The council follows these steps from Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort:

1. Identify ragwort. Carefully look at the plants to identify if it is common ragwort (see Appendix One). The Flora Britannica book and free [iNaturalist](#) app are also useful for identification.
2. Map the location and extent of ragwort.

3. If ragwort is on a designated site such as a Local Nature Reserve or Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), inform the relevant designation body. This is so that if removal is required the most appropriate method for control can be used and the correct permissions are granted. For example, Natural England may have to give permission for removal if on a SSSI.
4. Review the level of risk. These distances are only guidelines when assessing the risk, as prevailing winds and topography can affect the likelihood of ragwort spreading to neighbouring land.

- a. **High risk**

Common ragwort is present and flowering/seeding within 50m of land used for grazing by horses or other animals or land used for forage production.

Take immediate action to control the spread of ragwort using an appropriate control technique (see appendix two) taking account of the status of the land (see section 5.2, flow chart).

- b. **Medium risk**

Common ragwort is present within 50 - 100m of land used for grazing by horses or other animals or land used for forage production.

Establish a control policy to ensure that change from a medium to a high risk of spread can be anticipated, identified and dealt with in a timely and effective manner using appropriate control techniques (see appendix two) taking account of the status of the land (see section 5.2, flow chart).

- c. **Low risk**

Common ragwort is more than 100m from land used for grazing or forage production.

No immediate action is required.

The distances given above are guidelines only and when assessing risk, account should also be taken of particular local circumstances and other relevant factors such as prevailing winds, topography, shelter belts, natural barriers, soil type and vegetation cover of receiving land. Whether or not the density of ragwort is high or low, the risk factor will be determined by the likelihood of it spreading to land used for grazing and/or feed/forage production

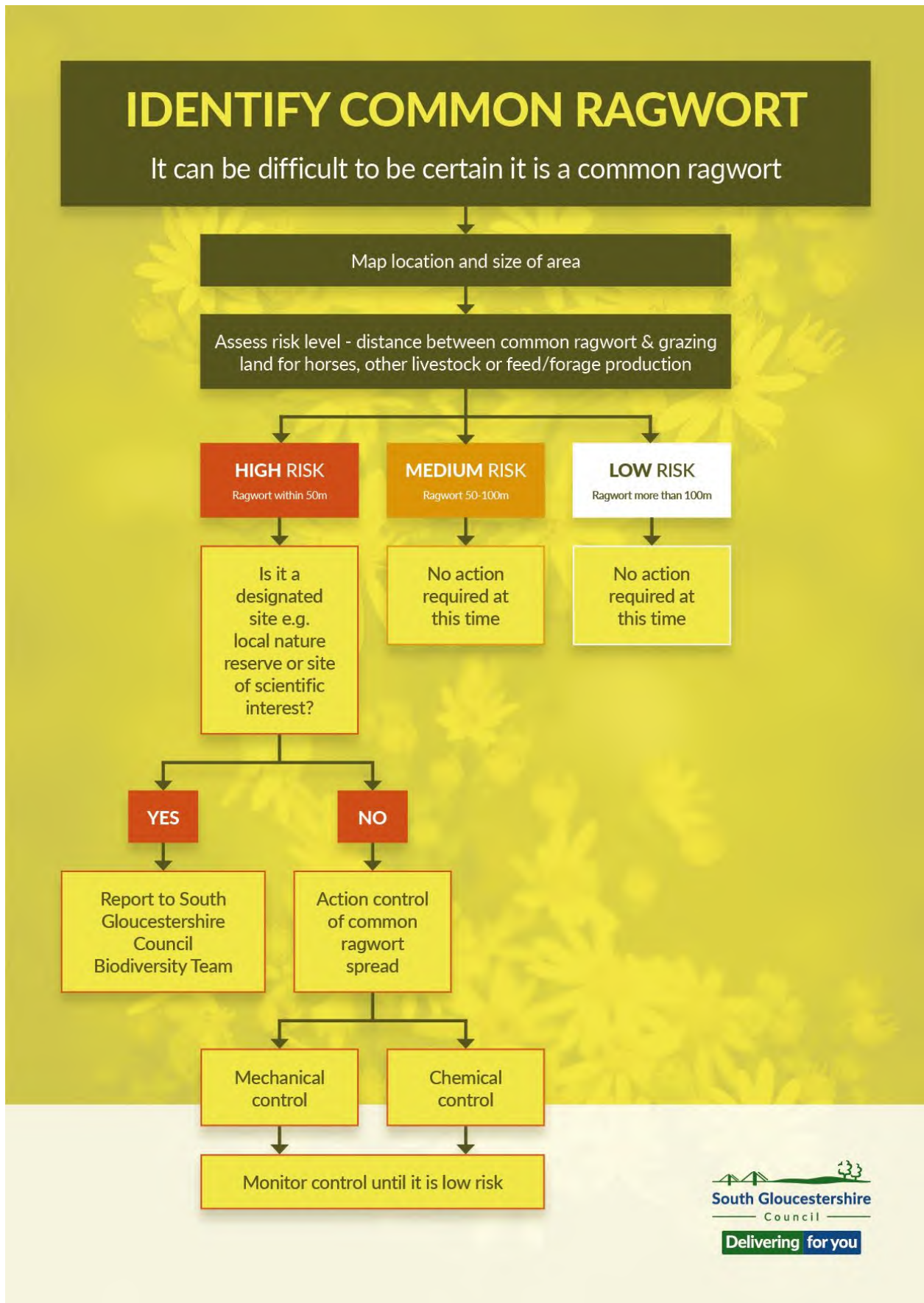
Dispose of ragwort plants in an approved manner (see appendix five in Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort).

Follow safety guidelines (see appendix six in Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort).

5. Record control methods used at each location.

6. Monitor the impact of clearance action to ensure its effectiveness for up to six months or to the end of the growing season if sooner

3.2 Flow chart for assessment of ragwort management



3.3 Control methods

The council will use the flow chart summarised in 3.2 to assess the risk and if control is required.

Control will only be taken where common ragwort is of high risk. Common ragwort is a highly successful plant, and a variety of methods may be required to control it.

Pulling and digging

This is the preferred method particularly for small sites of high priority. Pulling by hand or levering out works well for small amounts. A long-handled hand tool, such as the 'lazy dog' or 'ragwort fork', can be used to remove the tap root without it breaking. If root remains, it can develop into new plants.

Ideal timing is when the ground is damp and before plants have started to seed. Risk assessment for this work is required as for all practical works. In particular gloves should be worn when handling common ragwort as ragwort can cause skin irritation.

Pulled or dug ragwort must be removed from site because when dry, ragwort is palatable but still toxic to animals.

Herbicide

Second choice is using herbicide. Use the South Gloucestershire Council Pesticide Policy to assess control and application, and record use as required by COSHH (Control of Substances Hazardous to Health).

Citronella based herbicides have been shown to be effective to reduce ragwort.

Cutting

This is a last resort and stimulates growth, so should only be used to prevent immediate seeding where no other control method can be used. If cut, the plants can re-flower later in the season or change from a perennial to a biannual, flowering the following year.

Any cut plants are toxic and more palatable to livestock and should be removed from the field.

Land management

Common ragwort is a pioneer plant, growing on bare ground. Ensuring that there is other ground cover may help reduce ragwort growth. Common ragwort readily grows on disturbed soil so avoiding disturbance of the soil can help to prevent growth.

Disposal

Pulled, dug or cut ragwort must be put into a sealed bag or container to prevent spread of seed. Ragwort must be removed from site and burnt or composted for at least 12 months.

Appendix one: Ragwort identification

Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*) is tall, yellow flowered plant. It is beneficial to a range of wildlife, but it is also a specified weed under the Weeds Act 1959. It is a poisonous plant, containing pyrrolizidine alkaloids. It is unpalatable and only tends to be consumed by animals when other grazing is not available. Animals ingesting small amounts do not show signs of illness.

To aid identification, iNaturalist is a free app that easily and immediately suggests identification of plants from a photo.

Features

- Rosette of low growing leaves at the base, visible all year round.
- Height - up to 1m in height, unbranched and with numerous flower heads at the top.
- Leaves are dark green and tough with irregular, ragged-edged lobes. They can also be mildly hairy on the underside.
- Flowers are large, flat-topped head of numerous, densely packed bright yellow daisy-like flowers.
- Seeds are white and downy, similar to a dandelion seed, making them easily dispersed and able to fly on the wind. Seeds are viable for 15 years.

Lifecycle

- Ragwort is normally a biennial plant, present as a rosette close to the ground in its first year (see appendix one), then growing upwards and flowering during its second year. Cutting or topping ragwort may alter the plant's lifecycle and result in it being present as a perennial.
- It usually flowers June-October, after which the plant dies.
- There are 19 species of the ragwort genus in the wild in Britain, most of these are garden escapees. Common ragwort (*Senecio jacobea*) is identified as an injurious weed.

IDENTIFICATION OF INJURIOUS WEEDS

This leaflet has been produced to assist in the identification of Injurious Weeds as prescribed in the Weeds Act 1959



COMMON RAGWORT – *Senecio jacobaea*



Mature plant



Young plant

Meggy Milner



Senecio jacobaea

Common Ragwort

A, plant; B, a lower leaf; C, flowering branch; D, disc flower; E, corolla of disc flower, partly cut away to show the stamens, and the style; F, mature achene from disc flower – some of the pappus cut off. *Not to scale.*

Young plant:

Young plants of common ragwort are evident from the autumn to early June as low rosettes in pasture and on bare ground. The leaves of these young plants are extremely variable, either undivided or simply divided into terminal oval and smaller lateral lobes. These are usually a deep bottle-green, tinged purple, and slightly glossy on the upper surface.

Adult plant:

In their second or subsequent years the rosettes mature and produce flowering stems from late June onwards. These are between 30-100cm tall, carrying dense flat topped clusters of bright yellow daisy-like flower heads each 1.5-2.5cm across. The leaves on mature plants are strongly divided into narrow lobes with the bases clasping the non-woody main stem. The flowering stems die back after producing seeds.

Other ragwort species not prescribed in the Weeds Act 1959:

Marsh ragwort – *Senecio aquaticus*: Mature plants have elliptical or oval basal leaves. Upper leaves are less divided than those of common ragwort with larger terminal lobes. The flower heads are also generally larger at 2.5-3cm diameter.

Oxford ragwort – *Senecio squalidus*: Mature plants, which may have woody lower stems, rarely exceed 50cm in height, and have more widely spaced lobes on the leaves than common ragwort.

Hoary ragwort – *Senecio erucifolius*: Much more hairy than common ragwort, particularly on the leaf undersurface which is greyish in appearance.

Common Ragwort look-alike plants



Great Mullein *Verbascum thapsus*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Dark Mullein *Verbascum nigrum*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Dark Mullein *Verbascum nigrum*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England (Close-up of flowers)



Corn Marigold *Chrysanthemum segetum*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Perennial Sow-thistle *Sonchus arvensis*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Prickly Sow-thistle *Sonchus asper*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Hawkweed *Hieracium* sp
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Hawkweed Ox-tongue *Ficris hieracioides*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Bristly Ox-tongue *Ficris echioides*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England (Close-up of flowers)



Beaked Hawk's-beard *Crepis vesicaria*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Elecampane *Inula helenium*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Goat's-beard *Tragopogon pratensis*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England



Agrimony *Agrimonia eupatoria*
Photo: Dr Chris Gibson/Natural England

Appendix two: Control methods

Table 1: Control Methods. From Defra's Code of Practice on How to Control the Spread of Ragwort

Table 1. Summary of control methods

Method	Labour requirement	Cost	Prevention of flowering	Success of control – long term	Grazing removal period (days)	Number of treatments required per year	Repeat time scale (years)	Optimum time of treatment	Suitable for large areas	Suitable for dense ragwort colonisations	Remarks
Cutting	*	*	**	*	0(1)	1/2	1	F	***	***	Emergency treatment to prevent seeding. It is essential to cut before seed heads are mature and must be followed with a control technique
Levering out	***	*	***	**	0(1)	1/2	1	F	*	*	Tools available for digging up plants. Best results when soil is wet. Very dependent on spotting plants, some may be missed requiring further treatment.
Herbicide citronella oil derived product (3)	***	***	***	***	7(2)	1-2	1	R and F	*	*	Very dependent on spotting plants, resulting in some being missed. Large plants may need respraying two weeks later. Will control broad-leaved plants.
Herbicide selective spraying (3)	*	**	***	***	21(2)	1-2	1	R	***	***	Most products will kill other broad-leaved plants sprayed.
Herbicide spot treatment (3)	***	**	***	***	21(2)	1-2	1	R or F	***	*	Very dependent on spotting plants, some may be missed requiring further treatment.
Herbicide weed wipes (3)	*	**	**	**	21(2)	1-2	1	F	***	***	Only tall ragwort plants will be affected.
Pulling by hand	***	*	***	**	0(1)	1/2	1	F	**	*	Gloves must be worn. Best results when soil is wet. Very dependent on spotting plants, some may be missed requiring further treatment.
Pulling by machine	*	**	***	**	0(1)	1	1	F	***	***	Selects plants for pulling, on height difference and leaves shorter plants.
Biological	*	***	*	?	N/E. Not suitable as a method of control on grazing land	1	1	R or F	***	***	Biological control using the cinnabar moth is at the early stages of development in the UK.

Key: * Low ** Medium *** High R – When rosettes start growing; F – early summer before flower heads mature; (1) – Provided ragwort cuttings are removed; (2) These timings are only a guide – follow the manufacturer's guidelines; (3) Always follow the manufacturer's guidelines. For further advice on grazing removal periods, refer to paragraphs 23 and 24 of Appendix 3. For a list of suitably qualified spray contractors, contact the National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NAAC). See Appendix 9 for details.

For more detail on ragwort control please see [Defra's Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort.](#)

Disposal

The Defra Code of Practice details disposal requirements as copied below:

1. Safe disposal is an important part of ragwort control. Options for disposal will depend on the amount of ragwort to be disposed of and the local resources available for disposal.
2. Cut and pulled flowering ragwort plants may still set seed and all parts of the ragwort plant remain toxic when treated or wilted. Cut and pulled plants will therefore continue to pose a risk to horses and other grazing stock and should be removed from areas where they could be ingested by vulnerable animals.
3. Options for disposal of ragwort plants include, sealing in plastic bags for incineration or landfill, or by disposing in an environmentally acceptable way, whereby it will not be a risk to grazing animals and the seed will not be spread. When plants are incinerated this must be undertaken in accordance with the Code of Practice for the Protection of Air (Appendix 8) and Local Byelaws. Landfill sites must be an approved Local Authority facility. The Environmental Services Department of your Local Authority will be able to identify the nearest waste reception centre. When transporting pulled ragwort, care should be taken to ensure that it is either in a sealed container or well-covered to prevent the spread of seed.
4. Composting in the open is not recommended. If the composting process does not kill the seeds, there will be a risk of spread of ragwort. Composting should therefore not be used for disposal of ragwort, unless the temperatures reached are sufficient to destroy viable seed.
5. Since the Code was published in 2004 Defra has published a more detailed publication on this subject entitled Guidance on the disposal options for common ragwort (PB 11050) available from Defra Publications

Safety Guidelines when handling ragwort as copied from Defra's Code of Practice:

1. Ragwort is a toxic plant and suitable precautions must be taken when handling live and dead plants. Hands must be protected by wearing sturdy waterproof gardening type gloves. Arms and legs should also be covered. A facemask should be used to avoid the inhalation of ragwort pollen.
2. If skin comes into contact with ragwort the area should be thoroughly washed in warm soapy water, rinsed and dried. Operator safety
3. Care must also be taken to ensure operator safety when undertaking ragwort clearance. This is particularly important when clearance takes place on road verges and other public areas accessed by motor vehicles.
4. If assistance is provided by volunteers, they must be competent to undertake the task and have adequate training (including road safety). They should be supervised to ensure that they are not a danger to themselves or to others. This is particularly important when clearing ragwort from roadside verges on the public highway.
5. Before clearance commences a sufficient and suitable risk assessment should be undertaken which:
 - identifies the hazards
 - decides who may be harmed by them
 -

evaluates the risk and decides whether the existing precautions are adequate or whether more should be done • records the findings • reviews the assessment and revises it if necessary. Further guidance on undertaking risk assessments is available from the Health & Safety Executive (see Appendix 7).

6. When digging or pulling ragwort adjacent to a public highway i.e. roadside verge, public footpath, bridleway or byway open to all traffic, it is essential that operators can be seen by other road/highway users. All operators should wear high visibility clothing and generally work facing the traffic. Basic road safety training should be provided to raise the awareness of road safety hazards. No attempt should be made to dig or pull ragwort in poor visibility or during the hours of darkness on roads.
7. Any vehicles used to transport operators to the location where ragwort is being controlled must be parked safely and must not be parked in such a way as to obstruct the public highway.
8. Standard road works signing should be set up in accordance with standard practice governing the type of road. On trunk roads including motorways different rules apply and traffic signing needs to be approved by the Trunk Road Agent and Police prior to being erected or works beginning.
9. On high-speed dual carriageways where the speed limit exceeds 50 mph, special traffic management requirements are called for under the terms of the Highways Agency document “Guidance for Safer Temporary Traffic Management”, published by the Transport Research Laboratory Ltd.