

RAGWORT

I'VE BEEN WRITING this column for nearly five years now and was a little interested to see how my writing style has changed over the years. I started browsing through my initial articles and found my first-ever column on ragwort. To those of you who read it, I apologise most profusely. It is honestly the most boring, formal and stuffy piece of work I have ever produced. Hopefully this column will make amends in slightly more interesting style.

Ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*) is a common pasture weed found all over New Zealand, especially in the wetter parts of the country. It's originally native to Europe and Asia, but this particularly noxious weed was first found in NZ in Dunedin in 1874. It is a member of the Asteraceae family which includes such notables as the daisies, the thistles, artichokes and even lettuce.

Ragwort is a true problem weed in pasture. It is quite toxic to cattle and horses, causing severe damage to the liver. Sheep and goats are less susceptible but can still get a bit crook if they eat too much. All across NZ, ragwort is subject to Pest Plant Management Strategies. This means that if you have it on your property, you need to be taking steps to control it.

Identifying ragwort is reasonably straightforward. It germinates during winter or early spring and rapidly forms a small, densely-leaved rosette. The leaves of ragwort have short stems (older leaves have no stem), are deeply dissected and appear almost frilly. Often they have a purple colouring to the underside of the leaf. After a year or so as a rosette, the plant begins to bolt and produces a stem with many branches at the top of it. At the top of the plant, the stem is quite hairy but these hairs disappear further down the plant and the stem becomes quite purple.

It tends to flower between November and April, producing many bright yellow little flowers (2cm diameter) in a flat top cluster. These flowers have the potential to produce 50,000 to 150,000 seeds so you can see why it's easy for ragwort to colonise an entire paddock very quickly.



Photo: Rashaak Wikimedia Commons

WHY IS IT A WEED?

It is a competitor of pastures

WHERE IS IT FOUND?

All across New Zealand

IS IT TOXIC?

Very toxic to horses and cattle, less so to sheep and goats

ALTERNATIVE USES?

Historically used as a dye and is also a food source to a large number of insects

HOW TO CONTROL IT

This can be a bit of a mixed bag. Grubbing or pulling of plants is ineffectual as any fragments of root left in the ground will regrow into new plants.

Mowing or topping of the plants is also not recommended as this tends to promote the formation of multiple crowns which makes further control harder.

The only effective way to control ragwort is to spray it when it is in its early rosette stage. At this point you have many control options ranging from MCPA to 2,4 D. If the rosettes are larger, then it's best to use a product like Tordon™ PastureBoss™.

However, it's important to know these chemicals can cause serious damage to clover so you are best to spot spray (only spray the weed) if you can. ■



Ragwort
(*Jacobaea vulgaris*)

WARNING

Spraying ragwort can make it more palatable to stock. Be sure to let it die away completely before putting stock back into the paddock.

MILTON MUNRO is a soil and plant scientist for rural supply company PGG Wrightson. He looks at common pasture weeds on blocks and how to deal with them.

