

RAGWORT AND Paddock MAINTENANCE ESSENTIALS

Common Ragwort is a highly toxic weed which has been the bane of farmers and horse owners for centuries and is the best known of a group of noxious and injurious weeds. The plants also covered by the Weeds Act 1959 and the Ragwort Act 2002 are Spear Thistle, Creeping or Field Thistle, Curled Dock and Broad Leaved Dock. Japanese Knotweed, Giant Hogweed and Field Bindweed and many other invasive weeds are covered by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

The above problem weeds are both extremely invasive and injurious and if your field is badly maintained, then you have a problem which can easily get out of hand. Not only do you risk your horse eating potentially lethal plants, but the nutritional quality of the pasture will be lower, and there may be a risk of injury in a poorly looked after field.

The identification, removal and control of these weeds is critically important and must be an integral part of any pasture maintenance regime. It is important to remember that all of these weeds are able to grow in most soil types and conditions, and if left unchecked will continue to re-appear year after year.

The removal of any infestation is based on three main principles – firstly of knowing your enemy, secondly removing it and thirdly of disposing of it in the correct manner.

All horse owners who put their animals out to graze must study and learn what the common weeds look like at all stages of their development, especially those prevalent in your area or field. This is easily done by research on the web, by reading magazine articles or by contacting the British Horse Society.

The most effective time to remove any weed is when they first appear and their root system is not yet mature. It is much more difficult to remove a mature plant in the summer months when the ground is hard and compacted as the extraction of the entire root system is not guaranteed. For example, once the yellow ragwort flower is visible, then removing a mature plant is merely an exercise in crisis control as often the seeds have already been dispersed. These removal tasks must be carried out over at least a two year period as many of the weeds are biennial plants.

The removal of the weed itself may be removed by hand, or by using specialist tools such as the Fyna-Lite Multi Weeda. Once a plant is removed, pouring rock salt down the resulting hole can help kill any remaining roots. Any weed removal must be undertaken with the correct protective clothing. The minimal protection required is thick gloves, long sleeved tops and long trousers, boots and a mask to avoid inhalation of ragwort pollen or other airborne particles. If ragwort comes into contact with bare skin, the area should be washed in warm soapy water, rinsed and dried.

There are several specialist companies who specialise in the treatment and removal of invasive and noxious weeds. If you have a large and persistent problem, it may be a good idea to seek their advice.

Once the weeds have been removed, they must be disposed of in the correct manner. It is always best to contact your Local Authority or DEFRA. (www.defra.gov.uk) as they can advise on your specific requirements. Careful disposal of any weed is imperative as most weeds can seed after being removed and there is a high risk of seed dispersal during transportation.

If the above advice is followed, then you have taken important steps into providing a safer environment for your horse and help to prevent it from being exposed to the deadly dangers of ragwort and the other injurious weeds. Remember, the earlier you deal with the problem, the lesser the problem later in the year.

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Fyna-Lite