



# NOXIOUS WEEDS

## Protection of the environment

The Noxious Weeds (Guernsey) Law 1952 (as amended) prescribes four common weeds: Ragwort, Hemlock Water Dropwort, and Spear and Creeping Thistle. The purpose of this law is to prevent these weeds from setting seed and contaminating agricultural land.

### SPEAR THISTLE AND CREEPING THISTLE

(*Cirsium vulgare* and *Cirsium arvense*)

Spear and Creeping Thistle are troublesome weeds that are abundant in fields, roadsides and derelict places.

Creeping Thistle is particularly difficult to eradicate once established due to its creeping root system which sends up new plants some distance from the parent. This causes problems for farmers and gardeners who find it difficult to eradicate. It is resistant to weedkillers and difficult to dig up, and is a major problem for farmers or growers of 'organically grown' crops. The flowering stems grow 30-100cm in height and produce clusters of purple flower heads from July onwards. The masses of seed they produce are readily spread on the wind to infest fresh places. Spear Thistles appear very similar but their flower heads are usually bigger than the Creeping Thistle. Care should be taken to ensure correct identification as only Spear Thistle and Creeping Thistle are 'noxious' weeds. Marsh Thistle, Slender Thistle and Nodding Thistle are not.

### CONTROL OF PLANTS

Long term control of thistles in pasture can be achieved through cutting at least twice in a season. Fertilizer can be applied to encourage grass growth, which will compete against any thistles present, but fertilizers should not be used on traditional flower meadows as the increased competition will reduce the range of plant species present.

Heavy infestations are difficult to control without the use of herbicides. Cut or dug plants must be disposed of carefully. These should be burnt or sealed in a plastic bag to decompose, as they can still produce 'viable' seeds.



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## HEMLOCK WATER DROPWORT

(*Oenanthe crocata*)

Hemlock Water Dropwort is a very poisonous weed commonly found growing in moist conditions along streams and dourits.

The plants emerge from over wintered roots and flowering stems start to appear in late spring. These produce flat heads of small white flowers on stems that can grow up to 1.5m in height.

The most distinctive feature of this plant is the swollen white roots often referred to as "dead man's fingers". These roots are extremely poisonous and are readily eaten by livestock, often with fatal consequences from the poison they contain. They are often left exposed when streams and dourits are dug out and caution must be taken before livestock is allowed access to fields where this has taken place.

Hemlock Water Dropwort produces large quantities of seed that can be readily spread along streams and dourits.



## CONTROL OF PLANTS

The best method of controlling Hemlock Water Dropwort is by cutting the stems before plants flower. Repeated cutting will eventually weaken plants.

*Under the 'Prevention of Pollution Law' 1989, the use of herbicides within 3 metres of a high risk area (such as a pond or watercourse) is prohibited unless applied with a 'weed-wiper'. Consult the States Water Board for advice.*



## Animal Poisoning

Ragwort is poisonous to horses, cattle, deer, sheep, pigs, goats, dogs and humans. Horses are particularly susceptible to poisoning. Even small amounts of Ragwort will cause damage to the liver with clinical signs only showing once the liver is 75% destroyed, at which stage the damage is irreversible. The British Horse Society estimates that more than 500 horses die in the UK each year from the effects of Ragwort poisoning.

There are often cases of horse and cattle poisoning by Ragwort (or by Hemlock Water Dropwort) in Guernsey.

The safe disposal of dug, pulled or cut Ragwort or Hemlock Water Dropwort plants is essential. Ragwort can still set and disperse seed, and all parts of the plants remain toxic. Livestock are particularly attracted to the dug roots of Water Dropwort.

## COMMON RAGWORT

(*Senecio jacobaea*)

Ragwort is a very poisonous weed commonly found in poorly managed grassland, hedge banks and wasteland.

Young plants can be seen as a rosette of bottle green leaves that are tinged purple. These produce flowering stems from June onwards that are 30-100cm tall and which carry dense flat-topped clusters of bright yellow daisy-like flowers. These flowers produce masses of seed that is readily spread on the wind.

All parts of the plant are poisonous. It becomes more dangerous when dried, particularly if included in hay or silage, as the plant is normally bitter in taste but becomes palatable to stock once dried.

Having a progressive effect on the liver, the alkaloid poisons contained in Ragwort can cause the death of horses and livestock several weeks after it is eaten.

## CONTROL OF PLANTS

The best method of control is by digging out plants (pulling can leave fragments of root to regenerate) before they flower. Any plants removed after they are in flower will still set seed and so ideally should be burnt. Control can also be achieved through the use of spot treatments with herbicides.

Ragwort that has dried becomes more palatable to horses and livestock and so may be readily eaten. Care should therefore be taken in clearing away Ragwort after digging or cutting and before allowing animals access to treated fields.



## Poisoning People

Anyone controlling poisonous plants such as Ragwort and Hemlock Water Dropwort, whether by digging, hand pulling, or the use of herbicides, is advised to wear suitable protective clothing to avoid the plants coming into contact with the skin or eyes.

It is very important to wear rubber gloves and to wash hands thoroughly afterwards. Children are particularly vulnerable to poisoning by the plants as they may handle the plant and then put contaminated fingers into their mouths.

For further advice on the identification of Noxious Weeds and the best methods for their control please contact the Agriculture and Countryside Board, telephone 235741

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**The best method to dispose of noxious weeds is by on site burning but this should be done without causing nuisance to neighbours or danger to road users. Alternatively noxious weeds may be sealed in plastic bags and stored until composted and all seeds destroyed.**

## CARE FOR THE COUNTRYSIDE

### Identification of Noxious Weeds

It is important that noxious weeds are correctly identified to prevent removal of beneficial plant species. There are for example a number of species of thistle, such as the rare Marsh Thistle that are beneficial to wildlife, and are not considered to be 'noxious' weeds.

### Use of Herbicides in Flower Meadows

Herbicides should not be used to treat noxious weeds in traditional wild flower meadows or hedgerbanks unless a proper evaluation is carried out to ensure that wildlife species will not be harmed. In some situations the use of spot treatment may be appropriate, preferably using a 'weed-wiper' or a herbicide impregnated glove.

### Use of Herbicides close to Watercourses

Under the 'Prevention of Pollution' Law 1989, the use of herbicides is prohibited within 3 metres of a high-risk area, such as stream banks, ponds, wet meadows, marshy areas, douits, drainage ditches or underground culverts. As an exception to this, herbicides may be applied using a hand held "weed-wiper" or a herbicide impregnated glove but must not be used closer than 1 metre from a high-risk area. For further information on the use of herbicides close to high-risk areas please contact the States Water Board.