

Guidance from DEFRA

([Stop ragwort and other harmful weeds from spreading - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#))

How to stop harmful weeds spreading onto land used for grazing livestock or growing crops, how to dispose of them and how to report them if they've spread.

From:

[Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs](#) and [Natural England](#)

Published

20 May 2019

Last updated

29 July 2019 — [See all updates](#)

Applies to:

England

Contents

1. [Stop harmful weeds spreading to agricultural land](#)
2. [Prevent ragwort spreading](#)
3. [Control harmful weeds](#)
4. [Dispose of harmful weeds to stop them spreading](#)
5. [Prevent animals eating harmful weeds](#)
6. [Report harmful weeds](#)
7. [What Natural England will do](#)
8. [Weeds considered low risk](#)
9. [Action landowners must take](#)
10. [When no action is taken](#)

Print this page

Harmful weeds, also known as injurious weeds, are native to the UK and contribute to biodiversity.

Some harmful weeds are poisonous to animals, or can damage crops if they spread.

Harmful weeds are:

- common ragwort, Spear thistle, broad-leaved dock, curled dock, creeping field thistle

Find out how to [identify these harmful weeds](#).

Stop harmful weeds spreading to agricultural land

You can have harmful weeds growing on your land, but you should stop them spreading on to agricultural land that's used:

- for grazing
- to produce forage, like silage and hay

- to grow crops

You may have to pay back [costs associated with clearing the weeds](#) if you do not clear them yourself when Natural England asks you to.

Prevent ragwort spreading

Read the [Code of Practice on How to Prevent the Spread of Ragwort](#) to understand how to control ragwort. If you can show you have adopted control measures which comply with the guidance in the code of practice, this can help you avoid fines under the Weeds Act 1959.

Control harmful weeds

You should control harmful weeds on your land so they do not spread to [agricultural land](#).

If your land is a [protected site](#), you may need permission before you use some control methods.

Find out how to spray plants with chemicals in the [Stop invasive non-native plants from spreading guide](#) if you want to control weeds with herbicides.

Control methods

You can control weeds by using a combination of:

- spraying or wiping the plants with chemicals
- pulling or digging out live, dead or dying plants
- cutting back plants to prevent the seeds dispersing
- burning plants using a spot burner
- managing livestock so they do not overgraze and create bare areas where weeds can grow

Dispose of harmful weeds to stop them spreading

You should not let seeds spread or put grazing animals at risk when you dispose of harmful weeds.

On-site disposal of harmful weeds

You can dispose of small quantities of weeds by letting it rot down on site. You should put it in a container with a lid, such as a rigid compost bin, to prevent seeds dispersing.

You should use an on-site biomass facility or incinerator to dispose of larger quantities of weeds. You must have an [environmental permit](#) to do this.

Off-site disposal of harmful weeds

If you burn or dispose of harmful weeds off site, you must:

- use a [registered waste carrier](#) to remove waste
- make sure that waste is disposed of at an appropriate site - find out by checking with the site directly, asking your [local authority](#) or check the [Environment Agency public register](#)

If you use a site which is not permitted to dispose of waste, you could be fined or go to prison.

Prevent animals eating harmful weeds

Some [harmful weeds](#) are poisonous to animals if they eat them.

Animals most at risk are:

- horses
- ponies
- grazing livestock, such as cattle and sheep

If you own horses, ponies or livestock you must not allow them to graze on land where you know ragwort is present.

You can be prosecuted if you allow animals to suffer by eating harmful weeds.

Report welfare concerns

If you're a member of the public and you see [harmful weeds](#) growing where horses, ponies or livestock are grazing, you can report this to the:

- [Animal and Plant Health Agency \(APHA\)](#)
- [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(RSPCA\)](#)
- [British Horse Society \(BHS\)](#)

Report harmful weeds

You can ask Natural England to act where harmful weeds:

- [have spread to agricultural land](#)
- are considered to be at high risk of spreading - this usually means they're growing within 50 metres of agricultural land

When Natural England will not take action

Natural England will usually not take action if weeds:

- have spread on to other types of land, such as private gardens or allotments
- are growing more than 100 metres from agricultural land - the risk of these weeds spreading is considered to be low

Natural England will not take action in cases where there are [concerns about animal welfare](#).

Before you contact Natural England, you should ask the responsible landowner to remove the weeds - you'll usually need to show you've made reasonable efforts to do this before it will take your case further.

Complaint form

If the landowner or occupier refuses to take action, complete the [injurious weeds complaint form](#). Email it to weedenquiries@naturalengland.org.uk or post it to:

Natural England Enquiries Team
Natural England
County Hall, Spetchley Road
Worcester
WR5 2NP

What Natural England will do

Natural England will aim to reply to your complaint within 10 working days and tell you what action it plans to take.

Weeds considered high risk

If the complaint is valid and the weeds are considered high risk, Natural England will write to the landowner to ask them to remove the weeds.

Natural England will write to you advising that the landowner has been contacted and will ask you to get in touch if the landowner does not clear the weeds.

You should do this within 2 weeks of the date given in the letter, otherwise Natural England will assume that you are content with the action taken.

Weeds considered low risk

If weeds are considered low risk, Natural England will not usually take action straight away but will ask you to:

- continue to monitor the spread of the weeds
- contact an adviser again within 12 months if you think the risk of weeds spreading is increasing

Natural England will not usually take action on complaints they receive at the end of the growing season - this is usually after October. It will reopen these cases the following spring.

Action landowners must take

Natural England will write to the landowner to tell them it has received a complaint. Landowners are usually asked to clear the weeds within 28 days from the date of the letter.

During June, July, August and September landowners will be asked to clear the weeds within 14 days.

If horses or livestock are present on the infested land, Natural England may reduce this time to 7 days.

Natural England will explain in the letter the deadline by which the landowner or occupier must clear weeds from their land.

When no action is taken

If the landowner or occupier says they have cleared the weeds and the complainant does not object, Natural England will take no action.

The complainant can inform Natural England if the landowner or occupier has not cleared the weeds. In these cases, Natural England will inspect the land.

Published 20 May 2019

Last updated 29 July 20+ [show all updates](#)[Contents](#)