Recognising Ragwort ‘The Poisonous Bouquet’

What is recognised by some horse and donkey owners as a ‘major danger’ to their animals? But is ‘ignored’ by others and seen as no danger whatsoever?

What was once the subject of parliamentary questions but dismissed without debate and the MP who had dared to raise the question, told to go away?

What should we all be concerned about, whether an animal owner or not?

What is the yellow flower that so many are hailing as a pretty asset to our verges and footpaths?

YES, it is Ragwort!

Many years ago, at the Equine Event held in November at Stoneleigh Park in Warwickshire I took time out from the Donkey Breed Society stand to attend a lecture on ‘Ragwort’ which opened a whole new field of thought something that each and every one of us needs to involve ourselves with, not just as animal owners, but as humans too.

Ragwort, that pretty yellow flower we know only too well is gradually colonizing most of the UK’s highways and byways and although often seen alongside the perennial favourites of Ragged Robin and Cow Parsley, is the most deadly of companion plantings.

It is a proven fact that an equine eating this plant suffers irreparable and accumulative liver damage as a result, and that death when it comes is both unavoidable and distressing. Whilst we are probably all aware that we humans can and do survive with reduced liver function, it is probably hard to accept that for an equine 25% one day means life – 24% a day later means death, and make no mistake, it is THE MOST DISTRESSING DEATH.

Farm animals are no less susceptible to the effects of this yellow peril, it is just that they are destined for the most part for our tables and so their life span is artificially, rather than toxically reduced.

But toxicity doesn’t end there; the human too is susceptible to the effects; coming into direct contact, if pulling the weed without protective gloves, or that bouquet of yellow flowers innocently picked with bare hands by your child or grandchild in the local park, will lead to reduced liver function, as documented by the Professor giving the presentation, who had done tests on himself.

Hard to believe that despite the constant lobbying by the equine welfare organizations that little notice is taken of this invasive plant outside the knowledgeable core of equine owners.

Many years ago one of my donkey mares suddenly became ill and had to be humanely destroyed all in the space of 24 hours, it was subsequently diagnosed that she had suffered liver failure and almost certainly due to the presence of Ragwort toxins; and I a responsible and aware owner, who had always taken steps to eradicate the plant from my land and had fed only home grown fodder, similarly screened.

So one has to ask – why did it happen to my donkey and could it happen to yours?

I have the misfortune to live adjacent to one of those eco friendly warriors who knows it all and who is reluctant to accept the fact that Ragwort can be a killer and prefers to see it as the friendly host to a much revered insect life. However, the same land that is host to an ever burgeoning crop of this paragon plant is walked regularly by locals and their dogs, who break any stems in their path, which then lay wilting and ready for buzzards and woodland mammals to transfer to open farmland and my paddocks. But with 1000’s of acres of forestry land in private ownership and the ragwort population reaching monumental proportions across its acreage with Professional Forestry Management consultants reluctant to accept responsibility, in fact preferring the self denial approach, nothing is going to change. Deadly for both the human and animal population, yet widely dismissed as being of no relevance in the general scheme of things.

But the big question is WHY?

The problem is so great that attempts at eradication are undeniably costly and largely ineffective.

Urban dwellers see it as a pretty flower; and worse still Horticulturalists have been known to refer to it favourably and even documented its arrival at Kew Gardens and resurgence at Oxford Botanical Gardens!!

Councils prefer to think of motorway verges and central reservations as havens for wildlife, thus excusing their reluctance to act responsibly. Equine owners reliant on leased grazing are at the mercy of the ‘cowboy’ landowner, uninterested in anything more than the monthly rent, and may even be unaware of the time bomb effect that ingesting the weed can have. Unless the plant is dug up and disposed of in the rosette stage it is set to become a perennial plant, and by the time the yellow flower is apparent it is far too late; the pollen has already spread its toxicity on the wind to surrounding grassland and is being ingested by an innocent grazing animal.

There will always be cavalier ‘it cannot happen to me or you’ attitude; however it can and will, the number of horses and donkeys dying from the effects of ragwort toxins is undocumented. Having only owned my mare for a small part of her life I cannot know her preceding grazing history or sources of forage, both or either of which were implicated in her ultimate fate when the chance ingestion of that next stem bought her life to an untimely end.

Although farm stock is just as susceptible, where death does occur it is not in a manner likely to have a financial impact act on the farmer and so there is unlikely to be any significant change in the attitudes towards the weed being present on grazing land.

WHAT CAN THE ORDINARY OWNER DO?

Remove all ragwort plants from grazing land by digging up at the rosette stage and BURN.

Be vigilant, be a bully, make sure that ragwort is cleared from neighbouring land, it may not make you a favourite neighbour but better that than another dead equine, but above all be safe.

If you buy in hay and straw, shake it out and check every bale for tell-tale, rigid, dry stems with yellow, albeit now dry flower heads. Nothing comes more toxic than those!!

Rosemary Clarke