

Trail Invaders

By Adam Brylowski, BTC Land Stewardship Coordinator

While hiking the Trail recently you may have come across a plant that seems slightly out of place. Slightly out of place in that it looks as if it belongs with the dinosaurs of the Jurassic era. With its huge spreading leaves, long bristly stalk and absolutely massive white seed head, this “Queen Anne’s Lace on steroids” isn’t typical of the flora that we’re used to here in Ontario. What I’m talking about is the infamous **Giant Hogweed** (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*).

Originally from the Caucasus mountains where Europe and Asia meet, this large plant was introduced to North America in the early 1900s as an ornamental curiosity. As curious as it is, Giant Hogweed is no laughing matter. Now considered to be an invasive species and a noxious weed in Ontario, it has become apparent that this plant is not only strange to look at and prolific, but can also be extremely dangerous. Putting Poison Ivy to shame, the harmful effects of Giant Hogweed can be severe, including burns, blisters, scarring and even permanent blindness. With this in mind we want to ensure that Trail users are informed about the plant, including how to spot it and what to do if you should come across it.

Identification

Perhaps the most important thing to do when coming across a suspected Giant Hogweed plant is to keep your distance. Even brushing against the plant can lead to the symptoms mentioned above. Having said that it is important to know what you’re looking at. There are a few Giant Hogweed look-alikes out there that could easily be confused for this noxious plant. Mainly Cow-parsnip, Angelica or even Queen Anne’s Lace.

A fully matured Giant Hogweed plant certainly lives up to its name.

The average height of a typical plant ranges between 8-15 feet. It has distinctive umbrella shaped clusters of small white flowers that grow on massive seed heads that can be up to 2 feet across. Its leaves are dark green and coarsely toothed and can be huge, growing upwards of 5 feet wide. Perhaps the most identifying features, apart from the size of this monstrous plant (no other similar plant compares to its size), are the purple blotches or spots that exist on the hollow green bristly stem. This alone distinguishes



it from its look-a-like plants such as Cow-parsnip which has very few if any purple spots on its stem, or Angelica, the stem of which is entirely purple.

Effects

It’s the clear watery sap of Giant Hogweed which, upon contact with skin, produces a condition called photodermatitis. This results in skin becoming extremely sensitive and reacting to sunlight. The reaction can include severe irritation, painful blisters, purplish or blackened scars that can last upwards of 5 years and temporary or permanent blindness! With this in mind,



Giant Hogweed

Giant Hogweed is not a plant to be taken lightly.

The chemicals responsible for the adverse reaction are called fluro-coumarins. They are present in the sap of a select few plants and act as a defense mechanism to ward off predators. The sap of Giant Hogweed can be found in the hairs, stem and leaves of the plant, meaning that simply brushing against it can cause a reaction. It should be noted however that reactions vary in severity and are commonly caused by direct contact with sap from a cut or crushed portion of the plant. It’s an unfortunately common story to hear of someone that was weeding their garden and mistakenly cut or pulled the plant without knowing what it was. This mistake can lead to a long and potentially painful recovery.

If you suspect that you may have come in contact with Giant Hogweed the best course of action would be to first wash the affected area with soap and water (if it’s available), keep that area out of direct sunlight and seek immediate medical help.

The best way to stay safe is to stay on the Trail when hiking. If you happen to come across Giant Hogweed while hiking the Trail, please note the location and contact us at 1-800-665-4453 or info@brucetrail.org.

