

## Natural South Marysburgh

### Poison Ivy is Out, Wild Parsnip is In

You can eat the root, but don't touch the plant!

The plant is Wild Parsnip, and with sufficient rain earlier this year, its lush, tall and dense stands are easy to spot in roadside ditches as you drive along. On the farm, when wildflower guides were limited to eradication booklets, and what toxins to apply, we just called it wild celery as the compound leaves certainly did resemble those of celery, and the thick brittle stem looked crispy enough to serve with the vegetables from our garden. Only the roots are edible though. Right now, we can recognize Wild Parsnip easily by its large yellowish-green flat umbels.

Weed guides said nothing about its darker side though—its ability to produce a rash, serious enough to make poison ivy pale by comparison. The plant was brought to North America by European settlers who grew it for its edible root. It is related to Cow Parsnip, Water Hemlock, Water-parsnip, as well as today's threat of the decade—Giant Hogweed. Interestingly, Wild Parsnip is also related to Queen Anne's Lace from which our familiar carrot was derived. All members of the parsley family, and most containing toxins in some form.

In the case of Wild Parsnip, the threat is much the same as it is from Giant Hogweed. Something called phyto-photodermatitis. We can break down the term into more manageable syllables to better understand what we are dealing with regarding this plant. Wild Parsnip plants have chemicals called psoralens (more precisely, furocoumarins). This compound is very toxic to fish, and some compounds actually are intentionally deposited in streams in [Indonesia](#) to catch fish. So, we have an interaction between the plant (phyto) and light (photo) that induces skin (derm) inflammation (itis). Once these furocoumarins are absorbed by the skin, they are energized by UV light on both sunny and cloudy days. They then bind to our DNA and cell membranes, destroying the cells and skin. So, it's not an allergic reaction like we get from contact with Poison Ivy, but rather, more like a chemical burn.

You can liken it to a sunburn, but unlike sunburn that will affect exposed areas as a whole, phyto-photodermatitis is different. Because its reaction is triggered specifically by

chemicals on the skin, only the skin affected by those toxins reacts when exposed to the light. Perspiration or otherwise wet skin, will speed up the absorption. What you end up with are unusual mosaics or streaks, reflecting where a damaged leaf or stem moved across the skin before exposure to sunlight. The affected area will redden and be followed by painful blisters that lead to a brown pigmentation, leaving scars that can last for years.

Why is there a concern now, when the plant failed to raise any eyebrows in the past? Like all invaders from other countries, Wild Parsnip has decided that it likes our climate, and has been spreading into new territories with each passing year. Once an infrequently encountered weed that popped up here and there in isolated patches, carpets of Wild Parsnip today can be found wherever it can get a toehold, thereby increasing the probability of exposure.

Unlike another invasive European arrival, Swallowwort (dog strangling vine), Wild Parsnip is a bit easier to control simply by being vigilant and digging it up whenever it is encountered. Mowing it repeatedly, if in a convenient location, may ultimately starve the root stock in time and, if not, it will

at least keep the plant from maturing and going to seed. Of course, the old-time honoured method of covering patches of it with a dark tarp to prevent sunlight from reaching the growing plants is also a good method.

If you do come in contact with Wild Parsnip and have advanced to the blister stage, relieving the burning symptoms first is a priority. Covering the area with a wet cloth will help. Calamine lotion is good for

most things, so you might try that. See a doctor, of course, if the burns are extensive. Otherwise, keep applying the lotions and let it run its course. It will heal in time, but is apt to leave some unsightly scarring.



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