Attack of the Giant Hogweed!

Giant Hogweed is a large, evil plant native to central Asia that has been creeping westwards across Europe, and now has landed on the eastern shores of North America. It was first sighted in Vermont, but it’s been in Pennsylvania (initially around Erie and in the east) at least since 2002.

It looks similar to some native plants, such as Wild Parsnip, Poison Hemlock (of Socrates fame), Angelica, and particularly Cow Parsnip.

However, Giant Hogweed’s sap contains furocoumarin, also known as psoralens. That’s why I say it’s evil: if you get the sap on your skin, and the skin gets exposed to even a little ultraviolet light, it causes a blistering reaction, by a mechanism similar to the mustard gas used during World War I. If you get it in your eyes, it might blind you. Bad stuff. The technical term is phytophotodermatitis (say that five times quickly!): phyto– (plant) photo– (light) –dermatitis (skin inflammation).

As far as I can tell, nobody really knows what the best treatment for the rash is, other than treating like poison ivy and staying out of the sun. Same thing for decontaminating your skin after touching the plant: decon like for poison ivy.


I hope I have instilled enough fear to motivate you to learn a little botanic self-defense.

It’s key to be able to identify this plant and **not touch it**.

The first picture shows Giant Hogweed in all its glory. It can be really big: up to fourteen feet tall, and it has big clusters of white flowers, up to two and a half feet across. Leaves can be up to five feet across. None of the other similar plants get so big.

So how do you tell it apart from Wild Parsnip, which grows around here? (If you ride your bike out the Panhandle Trail out past McDonald during the summer, you’re likely to see Wild Parsnip.) Simple. Wild Parsnip never grows nearly as tall, usually less than 5 feet, and has yellow flowers.

So how do you tell it apart from Poison Hemlock? Simple. Poison Hemlock has leaves that look like ferns no more than 2 feet wide, and it’s almost always less than 9 feet tall. To me, Poison Hemlock looks a little like Queen Anne’s Lace, which is everywhere around here, but not at all like Giant Hogweed or Cow Parsnip.

So how do you tell it apart from Angelica? Not nearly as big, and Angelica has clusters of flowers that are round and softball-sized, often green instead of white.
So how do you tell it apart from Cow Parsnip? OK, this is a bit more difficult, but is important as (1) they both are really very similar, and (2) Cow Parsnip grows all over the place. My daughter Laurel and I spent a week hiking along the Appalachian Trail and side trails in Shenandoah National Park this past June. Skyline Drive traverses the park from north to south, and the southern half of the Drive’s roadsides were covered in Cow Parsnip as far as the eye could see.

Cow Parsnip is reputed to grow no taller than 2 meters (a bit less than 7 feet) but in this picture of what is definitely Cow Parsnip from SNP’s Lewis Mountain area, compare to a sleepy Laurel who is 5’5”: it looks to me that the Cow Parsnip is about 9-10’ tall. Cow Parsnip, which is closely related to Giant Hogweed, has generally similar big somewhat flat-topped clusters of white flowers, big leaves with three leaflets, and stems that are green and often have small or even big purple splotches. The differences are:

- **Flowers**: Giant Hogweed has bunches of white flowers that have more than 50 rays in a cluster, while Cow Parsnip has less than 30.
- **Leaf Junctions**: Giant Hogweed leaf junctions with the stem are very hairy, Cow Parsnip stems may be somewhat hairy all over, but not more so at the leaf junctions with the stem.
- **Leaflets**: Giant Hogweed leaflets have deep slots between the leaflet veins, Cow Parsnip leaflets have shallow slots between the leaflet veins.

Happy flower-gathering, all.