

Northwest Garden News – Weed Articles  
Giant Hogweed  
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Giant hogweed is a big plant with a big name that causes big problems. Part of the botanical name, *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, is named after the big guy himself, Hercules. This plant is bold and dramatic and in the 1950's it was considered quite the prize in Seattle area gardens. But gardeners, and Seattle, got more than they bargained for. Giant hogweed is a public health threat, it is a noxious weed in Washington and it is on the federal noxious weed list.

How big is giant?

Towering plants, over 15 feet tall, are not uncommon. The deeply indented leaves are often 5 feet long. The umbel-type flower head can be 2.5 feet in diameter. The hollow stalks and stems are 2 to 4 inches wide. Each flower head is made up of many small, individual white flowers, each producing a seed, contributing to a seed bank.

How bad is bad?

Painful blisters, long lasting scars and itchy, oozing lesions are often reminders that you've been in contact with giant hogweed. The plant produces a clear watery sap (a glucoside called furanocoumarin) found in the stems and leaves. The sap on your skin reacts to sunlight. A rash appears 24 hours after exposure, the following day blisters erupt. On the third day the skin looks burned. Scars can last for days, or weeks or years depending on the person and the plant. Kids inadvertently run through plants, or are attracted to the large stems. Gardeners are susceptible when weeding and even dogs are affected when they come into contact with the sap.

English writer Charlotte MacLeod portrayed giant hogweed plants chasing people in her 1985 novel "The Curse of the Giant Hogweed". Those plants were controlled with a chant. Needless to say, that doesn't (always) work. When removing this plant, always cover any exposed skin. If you do come in contact with the plant, wash with plenty of cool soapy water. Keep the affected area covered from the sun.

Besides the ability to blister and scar, giant hogweed was not satisfied to remain in gardens – so it left. People, birds and water helped spread this ill-tempered garden guest from garden to garden, then to parks and beyond. Giant hogweed thrives in western Washington where it often settles in shady damp ravines, or along streams. It can also survive in sunny areas and it shows up on roadsides, in fields and ditches and in vacant land. Last year the King County Noxious Weed Control Program recorded 1181 sites.

Giant hogweed is a Class A noxious weed in Washington, which means plants must be eradicated. It is also illegal to buy, sell or offer for sale according to our state plant quarantine laws. It is a federal noxious weed, making it illegal to bring into the United States.

For more information on how to identify or control giant hogweed, please contact the King County Noxious Weed Control Program (206) 296-0290; or send and email to: [noxious.weeds@metrokc.gov](mailto:noxious.weeds@metrokc.gov) ; or refer to our website <http://dnr.metrokc.gov/weeds>

Giant hogweed is not native to this area. It originated in the Caucasus Mountains bordering Europe and Asia, between the Black and Caspian Seas. We do have a native plant that is closely related. Cow parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) usually grows to about 4 feet tall, it is not invasive and it does not cause burns or blisters.

The sap causes the skin to become hypersensitive to the UV radiation in sunlight.