



## Severe skin damage from Giant Hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*)

### What is Giant Hogweed, and where is it found?

Giant Hogweed (scientific name: *Heracleum mantegazzianum*), also known as the Giant Cow Parsnip, is a large perennial (survives for more than one year) plant in the Parsley family. It thrives near streams, creeks, ditches, roads, and in vacant lots (areas that are moist to wet), throughout south and central Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and Greater Vancouver. It is not native to B.C. and was originally imported from Asia as a garden curiosity. The plant is very large, growing up to 6 metres tall, with leaves as much as 1.5 metres across. After a few years of growth, the plant will bloom in summer, forming large clusters (up to 1 metre in diameter) of small white flowers.

### Which parts of the plant are poisonous?

The toxins are concentrated in the sap of the stalk, stems, and leaves. Giant Hogweed is listed as a poisonous plant with the Canadian Poisonous Plants Information System.

### What happens if I touch parts of the plant?

The plant sap contains photosensitive chemicals (furanocoumarins) that become toxic on contact with sunlight. The reaction can take place in as little as 15 minutes; however, you will not see or feel any effects for many hours. This makes the plant particularly dangerous for children, who have used the thick, hollow stems for “pea shooters” and “telescopes.” The skin will redden and blister, followed by inflammation, two or three days later. After a week, the affected skin will darken and this pigmentation can last for months or years.



*Giant Hogweed growing in a ditch*



*Giant Hogweed flowers*

## How can I protect myself?

Wear heavy, water-resistant gloves when handling the plants. Remember to dispose of the gloves after use (heavy rubber gloves can be re-used if carefully washed with soap and water). Do not get any sap on your exposed skin!

Wear water-resistant coveralls or clothing that leaves no skin exposed. Cotton and linen (and many synthetics) will soak up the plant sap, which can then penetrate to the skin. Plant “hairs” may also penetrate thin clothing. A worker in North Vancouver was burned, by the sap, through his clothing!

Wear goggles when disturbing or removing the plants, as small droplets of sap may be released into the air.

Use caution when transporting waste containing the plants.

## How do I apply first aid?

After skin contact with sap, wash the skin carefully with soap and water; keep the exposed areas away from sunlight for at least 48 hours. If a rash or blistering develops, consult a physician. Application of an anti-inflammatory cream (e.g., a 0.5% hydrocortisone cream) may reduce skin irritation. In the following months, a sun block cream should be used on sensitive areas. These creams are available in most pharmacy stores.

If the sap gets into the eyes, flush with copious amounts of water and use sunglasses, then consult a physician.



*Giant Hogweed leaves*



*Wear gloves, goggles, and water-resistant disposable coveralls, when handling the plants.*

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