

Wild Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*)

Identify, avoid, and manage this troublesome plant



The cultivated parsnip that we eat heralds from the appropriately named wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*). However, wild parsnip is a plant to avoid.

Identification

Wild parsnip can be found throughout Illinois invading prairies, oak savannas, and fens, as well as roadsides, old fields, and pastures.

It is closely related to Queen Anne's lace and has a similar umbrella-shaped flower. Wild parsnip's flower color is yellow, and it blooms earlier in the summer than Queen Anne's lace. Wild parsnip's stem is slightly hairy, grooved, and 2 to 5 feet tall. Leaves are coarse, with saw-toothed edges.

Health risks

Wild parsnip can leave those who encounter it with burn-like blisters on their skin. Standing next to wild parsnip will not result in a blister. A person must make skin contact with the sap of the plant from a broken leaf or stem.

The combination of sap on the skin and exposure to UV light causes phytophotodermatitis: **Phyto** (an interaction between plants) **photo** (and light) **derm** (that induces skin) **itis** (inflammation). The effects are likened to a severe sunburn.

What to do if you think you have been exposed to wild parsnip?

If exposed to wild parsnip sap, wash the area that came in contact immediately. If you begin to feel the burn, contact a physician for wound care recommendations.



Wild parsnip is found throughout Illinois including prairies, oak savannas, and roadsides. Image by University of Illinois Extension, Kendall County Staff

Management

Since the actual hazard lies in the sap of wild parsnip, exposure can be mitigated by wearing gloves, long pants, and long-sleeved shirts when working outside, in fields, or in overgrown areas that contain this plant.

- Plan weeding activities for later in the evening during low levels of sunlight to avoid activating the blistering process.
- Wild parsnip that has been cut and allowed to dry is safer to handle.
- Do not wait too long or forget to dispose of cut wild parsnip as seed can develop while the cut plant lays on the ground.

Check landscapes periodically for the presence of wild parsnip. Just because it isn't there now, does not mean it won't germinate next week.

Mechanical and chemical control

Wild parsnip is a biennial, so all control activities should be done before it starts flowering or at least during the early flower stage. The basal rosettes can also be controlled in the fall to prevent flowering the next year.

Mechanically control wild parsnip by cutting the root 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface. Brush-cutters can be used for large populations before the seed sets. When mowing dense stands of wild parsnip, eye protection and possibly a mask can protect your eyes and lungs. For smaller populations, cut off the flowering heads and dispose in a landfill.

Avoid using string trimmers where you may encounter wild parsnip. The pulverizing, flinging action of string trimmers sprays plant parts and juices everywhere. Operators are often left speckled with blisters and red rashes.

The little rosette of young wild parsnip can be spot treated with broad spectrum or broad-leaf specific herbicides.

For more information about recommended active ingredients and herbicide use, connect with your local Illinois Extension office at go.illinois.edu/ExtensionOffice.

Author

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Wild parsnip has an umbrella-shaped, yellow blooming flower. Photo by Emily Swihart, University of Illinois Extension.



Queen Anne's lace has a similar umbrella-shaped flower but white blooms. Photo by Chris Evans, University of Illinois Extension.

Updated January 2023

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