

On the Watch for Giant Hogweed



Why is giant hogweed cause for alarm? The invasive, exotic plant could alter the biodiversity of the Prairie State. Also, giant hogweed is known to produce painful, burning blisters when human skin comes in contact with its sap.

Story By Kelly Cook
Photo By Terry English, USDA
APHIS PPQ, United States.

Reaching heights twice that of a human, Illinois' newest exotic plant truly stands out. Native to the Caucasus Mountains and southwestern Asia, giant hogweed (*Heraclium mantegazzianum*), has been introduced to Europe, Canada and the United States. This invasive plant has been confirmed in several states including Maine, New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, Oregon, Michigan, and in August 2006, giant hogweed was confirmed in Lake County in northeast Illinois. Plants were found by participants in the New Invaders Watch Program, a cooperative program that engages citizens to spot new, invasive species that pose a threat to healthy ecosystems.

As indicated by its name, giant hogweed

Not only is this new, exotic plant an environmental concern, it is a serious public health hazard.

reaches heights of 10 to 15 feet. Its size helps separate it from other members of the carrot family (*Apiaceae*), including cow parsnip, poison hemlock and angelica. Other distinguishing characteristics include hollow stems between 2 to 4 inches in diameter with dark reddish-purple splotches and coarse white hairs. Leaves are compound, lobed, deeply incised and may grow up to 5 feet in width. As with other members of the carrot family, flower heads are umbrella-shaped and have numerous small flowers, but giant hogweed flowers may be up to 2.5 feet in diameter. Flowers appear in mid-May through July.

It is believed that giant hogweed made its way into the United States as an ornamental or was brought into the country for its fruit which is used as a spice in Iranian cooking.

Undoubtedly, its unique stature and appearance has enticed gardeners to cultivate this plant. However, due to its size and rapid growth, giant hogweed readily out-competes many native plants. This perennial can survive in a variety of areas, but is common along roadsides, right-of-ways, railroads, vacant lots, streams and rivers. Once established in an area, it can create a significant decline in biodiversity, increase soil erosion along riverbanks and is difficult to eradicate. In addition, it often grows in wet areas, and can be considered an invasive wetland weed.

This invasive plant threatens not only the environment, but also public health. The clear, watery sap produced by this species is capable of causing photodermatitis—a sensitivity of the skin to sunlight—and painful, burning blisters or even painless red blotches that may turn purple over time.

Giant hogweed is still rare in Illinois. While visitors in natural areas are unlikely to encounter this plant, it never hurts to keep a watchful eye for this and other invasive plants.



Readers are encouraged to report possible giant hogweed plants by contacting Kelly Cook at (217) 333-1005 or kcook8@uiuc.edu.

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