DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

Office of Environmental Stewardship
395 John Ireland Blvd.
St. Paul, MN 55155

5/15/2018

Work Safely Around Wild Parsnip

Wild parsnip sap contains toxins and humans can be poisoned through actions such as removing plants by hand pulling, weed whipping or working under a mower deck. These activities may result in wild parsnip sap contacting bare skin and can cause problems, if in addition, there is continued exposure to sun light.

The resulting reaction ranges from a sunburn like rash to a potentially serious blistering rash which can result in loss of time at work. Wild parsnip sap contains a chemical which upon exposure to sunlight can cause chemical burns on skin. Simple precautions can be taken to prevent wild parsnip injuries. First and foremost people working outdoors are at risk and should be able to identify wild parsnip in all of its life stages.

Identification

Plant: Herbaceous, biennial (monocarpic perennial), first year as a cluster of leaves growing directly from the ground and second year wild parsnip is a branched, 2-5 feet tall, robust plant. Stems typically lack hairs, are hollow, grooved and are light green.

Leaves: Alternate, pinnately compound with 5-15 leaflets. Three inch long by two inch wide leaflets are often cleft with coarse teeth on the margin. Basal leaves tend to be larger with longer stalks and more leaflets than upper stem leaves. Petiole to stem attachments are covered by a sheath.

Flower: Numerous small yellow flowers arranged in compound umbels (umbrella shaped clusters). Each flower is small and has 5 petals. Petals remain tightly curled.

Leaves of first year rosette and green grooved stem.

Typically, floral bracts at the base of umbels aid identification of carrot family members to species. However, wild parsnip does not have floral bracts under umbels and umbellets.

Bloom time varies from June through July (typically 1-2 months late spring to mid-summer), then plant parts wither.

Flowers are yellow and petals remain tightly curled.

Working safely around wild parsnip

- Unlike Poison ivy (an allergic reaction), everyone is susceptible to wild parsnip sap reactions.
- You can touch and/or brush past wild parsnip without causing sap flow; thus, no exposure to sap.
- Wild parsnip sap is not an oil like poison ivy sap (urushiol). Soap and water or plain water can effectively remove or dilute the sap and prevent skin damage if done in a timely manner.
- Skin that is protected from sun exposure (UV rays) should be effectively protected from skin damage even if sap were to get under clothing.

Proper clothing: Boots, long sleeves, long pants and good gloves. Cover the gap between glove and sleeve!

Laundering clothing: Unlike poison ivy, mixing contaminated clothing into the family wash is not an issue.

Avoid wiping sap onto your bare skin: Mosquitos, flies and other biting insects may have you swatting and or itching your bare face. If there is sap on your hand or glove, it will be effectively transferred to sun-exposed skin on your face and neck. Hot, sweaty skin means open pores - sap can then penetrate deeper and result in more severe damage.

Removing plants: Effective removal can be accomplished with a shovel or similar cutting tool. Cut the plants approximately 2 inches below ground. Leave plants in place to dry.

Mowing or cutting: Effectively knocks height down, but does not kill plants. Use caution around green, still moist plant material and cut stems that may ooze sap from cut surfaces. Leave plants in place to dry.

Herbicide: Given time, herbicide applications will kill plants. However, while plant material is green and not dry the sap still presents a hazard.

Wild parsnip and native cow parsnip

Wild parsnip is not native to Minnesota. It is related to other members of the carrot family such as native cow parsnip, which can also cause skin reactions.

Wild Parsnip (non-native)

Key Difference:

Flowers are yellow

Leaves are compound with 5-15 leaflets

Stems are green with definite ridges (grooves).

Cow Parsnip (native)

Key Difference:

Flowers are white

Leaves are 3-parted and can be 18 inches across and long

Stems are hairy, green to purple in color.

For more information

Visit MnDOT's Roadside Vegetation Management website or contact Dave Hanson, MnDOT Office of Environmental Stewardship, 651-366-3632

MnDOT's Minnesota Noxious Weeds Booklet