

ENVIRONMENTAL BRIEFING

Giant Hogweed – a timely reminder





Summary

A recent news report served as a stark reminder that invasive weeds can be potentially harmful to humans as well as the environment. It was reported that an 8-year-old British boy was left with blisters and burns on his hands and arms when he brushed against giant hogweed. The resulting scarring could be long lasting and has caused sensitivity to sun. The plant sap can also result in purple or black scars and there are some reports that eye exposure could result in irritation and possible blindness.

To avoid injury, familiarise yourself with the plant and avoid contact with skin. If the sap does make contact with skin,



wash the area thoroughly and immediately, seek medical advice and do not expose the area to sunlight for several days. Giant hogweed looks like an enormous cow parsley plant. It is mainly found along rivers and streams, but it thrives in many habitats including waste ground, woodland clearings, roadsides, and arable field margins. When fully grown, it can reach heights of 1.5m to 5m and have a spread of between 1m and 2m. It forms a rosette of jagged, lobed leaves in the first year before sending up a flower spike in the second year and setting seed.

<p>Stems are green, often with purple blotches and stiff, white, bristly hairs.</p>		<p>The leaves are huge, up to 1.5m wide and 3m long and deeply divided into smaller leaflets. Leaves look a bit like a rhubarb leaf, with irregular and very sharp or jagged edges – which has given rise to one of its other common names – wild rhubarb. The underside of the leaf is hairy.</p>	
<p>Stems are hollow with ridges and have a thick circle of hairs at base of each leaf stalk.</p>		<p>Giant hogweed flowers appear in June and July. They are small and white (or slightly pink) and are clustered on umbrella-like heads known as umbels that can reach a diameter of 60cm. All the flowers on the umbel face upwards.</p>	

It is an offence, under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, to cause giant hogweed to grow in the wild in England and Wales (similar legislation applies in Scotland). Anti-Social Behaviour Orders can also be used to require occupiers of giant hogweed infested ground to remove the weed or face penalties.

Key Points

- The sap of giant hogweed can cause burns and potentially blindness. It contains a chemical which makes skin extremely sensitive to sunlight (phytophotodermatitis).
- Severe skin blistering can occur if sap touches skin which is then exposed to sunlight. Blistering can recur over months and even years (phytotoxicity).
- The best way to avoid injury is to familiarise yourself with the plant and avoid contact with your skin. If you do get giant hogweed sap on your skin, be sure to wash the area thoroughly and immediately. Seek medical advice and do not expose the area to sunlight for several days.
- It is an offence to cause giant hogweed to grow and landowners can be required to remove it.
- Additional information can be found in the [Cemex Invasive Non Native Plants Note](#) and advice on control and management can be sought from Alex Finn, Cemex Restoration Manager.

For further details or information, please contact a member of the Sustainability Department.