

Don't Get Burned by **Wild Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*)** or other related species

Danger: The sap or juice from wild parsnip along with ultraviolet light (sunshine) can cause skin burns. Wild parsnip is a member of the carrot family and has a unique property that can cause phyto-photo-dermatitis. The chemicals in the juices of the plant are called furocoumarins. When they are absorbed by the skin, they are energized by ultraviolet light causing a breakdown of cells and skin tissue. The reaction causes a red, sunburn-like area that may blister. After exposure, the reaction will occur within 24 to 48 hours. Many times the burned area takes on a dark appearance that can last up to two years.

Identification: Wild parsnip is a fairly common plant found in ditches. It is shaped like an inverted umbrella with **yellow flowers** that bloom in July and August. The green stalks are ribbed with leaves that resemble celery. It usually grows 2-5 feet tall and in clusters. Unfortunately, it is easily confused with cow parsnip, which may also cause burns; purple stemmed angelica, probably our most common carrot family plant; hemlock and Queen Anne's Lace.



Figure 1- Wild Parsnip (Courtesy
Larry Allain @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database)

What to do: If you think you have been exposed to wild parsnip there are a couple of ways to protect yourself. Some people have reported some success with simply washing the affected area *immediately* after exposure. Another method involves covering exposed skin with protective clothing to prevent the ultraviolet light reaction. Remember that ultraviolet light is still present on cloudy days. **Due to the difficulty in field identification, it is wise to avoid all species on this sheet.**

Other Related Species



Figure 2- Cow Parsnip
(Courtesy W. L. Wagner @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database)

Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum maximum*): This plant can also cause burns, although it is less well documented. It is typically a more robust plant than wild parsnip, growing 3-10 feet tall. Flowers are white to cream colored and have a sweet fragrance. Leaves are hairy.

Queen Anne's Lace or Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*): Found in dry areas, this plant also can cause some skin irritation. It is the plant that all carrots we eat today are descended from. It grows up to 4 feet tall, with white flowers and purplish centers and fern-like foliage.



Figure 3-Queen Anne's Lace (Courtesy Patrick J. Alexander @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database)



Figure 4-Poison Hemlock
(Courtesy William & Wilma Follette @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database /USDA NRCS. 1992 wetland flora: Field office guide to plant species. West Region, Sacramento, CA)

Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) & Water Hemlock (*Cicuta maculata*): Neither of these forbs is known to cause skin reactions, however, they are very toxic if ingested. In fact, water hemlock is one of the most toxic plants in the U.S. Water hemlock has smooth, branching stems that are purple striped or mottled. It has white flowers and alternate, pinnately compound leaves. Poison hemlock grows 3-8 feet tall, has a smooth purple-spotted stem, and white flowers. Leaves and roots have a rank parsnip odor.



Figure 5-Water Hemlock
(Courtesy William S. Justice @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database)



Figure 6-Angelica

Angelica (*Angelica atropurpurea*): This is probably the most common member of the carrot family and the most innocuous. It is a strong scented, native herb, common in damp places. Growing from 4-6 feet tall, it has a smooth dark purple stem with leaves divided into 3 parts. It produces greenish-white flowers in June and July.