

Generations

The threat of hogweed is starting to loom large

Over two cups of coffee, I spent a good portion of the morning on July Fourth, reading about hogweed.

After I hung the flag in front of our house, glanced at Facebook to see how the rest of the world



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was celebrating the holiday, and scanned the tiresome political headlines, an article about hogweed on wired.com caught my eye and I couldn't resist.

I had never heard of hogweed, but my husband had when I posed the question to him and interrupted "Junkyard Empire" from his TV fare.

We are no gardeners, and our vision for our landscaping over the past 15 years was to plant perennials and evergreens that would come back or never leave so that when we got into our 70s and arthritis set in, we wouldn't have anything to do but admire the greenery and sniff the roses.

It wasn't that we didn't enjoy gardening. When we bought the house, landscaping was bare, and we took pride in planting our knockout roses, hedges, pampas, and two weeping willow trees, one of which, sadly, died this year.

Then there was the trial-and-error period of planting 50 tulip bulbs one year only to have



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Few people go hog wild over hogweed. It's considered to be an invasive species.

them disappear thanks to the rabbit population.

But back to the hogweed that made internet headlines and caught my eye. Like I said, I had never heard of hogweed, but apparently the people at the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and all the Cooperative Extension offices had, because other articles I researched stated that they're already on it and stand ready to help homeowners eradicate this latest nasty enemy of the people.

Giant hogweed is a large perennial herb in the carrot and parsnip family, typically 6 to 9 feet (but occasionally to 20 feet) tall. The stem is hollow, 2 to 4 inches in diameter, with dark-reddish-purple spots and bristles. The leaves may grow to

a width of up to 5 feet. The flowers are white and clustered into large umbrella shapes up to 2½ feet wide.

Hogweed, native to the Caucasus Mountain range in Asia, had been introduced in places all over the world, often by collectors working for botanical gardens. However, like creepy, imported kudzu, once introduced, it escaped into the natural habitat.

In the United States, it's been found in the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast states of Maine, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and, most recently, creeping into Virginia. The next sentence caught my eye and kept me reading: It has also been reported in Watauga County.

Now, I confess that I am a transplant from New York and not familiar with all 100 counties of North Carolina, but I know where Watauga is from all the snow forecasts made by Larry Sprinkle, and frankly, it's too close to comfort for this transplant.

This noxious plant's sap can produce severe symptoms on us humans that progress from red and irritated skin to large, fluid-filled blisters resembling burn symptoms.

Affected areas may remain sensitive to ultraviolet light, and re-eruptions of lesions and blisters may occur for several years. The good news is that your moist skin must come into contact with the sap from broken stems, crushed leaves, roots, flowers or seeds and then be exposed to sunlight for symptoms to occur.

Upon exposure, symptoms will take one to three days to appear. As someone who doesn't even have to touch poison ivy or its sumac and oak cousins to encounter an itch like no other, the "good news" doesn't make me feel safe at all.

Giant hogweed can move rapidly, producing up to 100,000 seeds in a season. The seeds can remain viable in the soil for a period of 10 years. The plant can grow among a wide range of habitats but prefers rich, damp soil found along streams, roadside ditches or other disturbed

moist areas. It loves mountainous regions.

Further research said this plant resembles something called cow parsnip, Queen Anne's Lace and elderberry, but its size of 10 to 20 feet tall makes it difficult to hide in a garden. That doesn't make me less concerned because wrestling with a 20-foot-tall weed that would give me a rash like no other isn't something recommended by any environmental officials, nor is the alternative of living like a hermit surrounded by 20-foot tall hogweeds appealing either.

So, what's the best course of action? Keep away from anything that resembles hogweed, even if you're completely covered, but whip out your phone and snap a picture of it.

The folks at your local Cooperative Extension office can help in determining if you've got the real thing or just another big ugly weed. For us here in Burke County, our district office is at 130 Ammons Drive in Morganton. The phone number is 828-764-9480.

It's better to be safe than sorry. And in everything I read, the warning was clear: Whatever you do, don't touch it. Leave that to the superheroes at the Cooperative Extension office and Department of Agriculture.

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