Beware the wild parsnip: Flowering plant found throughout Illinois can cause 2nd-degree burns

By Cindy Dampier
Chicago Tribune

You know enough to sidestep a melted Popsicle on the sidewalk. Your devotion to sunscreen borders on religious: Yes, you reapply. Dehydration? You fight it with an always-full water bottle. You’ve mastered warm-weather hazards like some kind of summertime ninja. In a sun hat.

But we bet you never saw the parsnip coming.

You know the parsnip, that white, carrotlike veggie you tend to eye suspiciously at the grocery store before reaching for the friendly, orange carrots? That parsnip, like a lot of us, has some wild cousins. And those wild parsnips, which show up along Illinois roadways, at the edges of parking areas, in vacant lots or anywhere weeds flourish this time of year, can put a serious dent in your summertime fun.

You may have come across the evidence online — over the last few weeks, people have been posting photos of style fascination has spread like internet wildfire. Or, you
Having a run-in with a patch of wild parsnip, it turns out, is likely to result in a skin reaction that can amount to the equivalent of second-degree burns, complete with impressively horrifying blisters that make for really eye-catching social media posts. The blisters can take weeks to heal. And even then, skin discoloration in the affected areas can remain for a year or more. “It’s really nasty stuff,” says Boyce Tankersley, director of living plant documentation at the Chicago Botanic Garden.

The burns are caused by the wild parsnip’s sap, or juice, coming into contact with skin and then being exposed to sunlight. The technical term is phytophotodermatitis, a plant and sunlight-based skin reaction. The sap contains a chemical which, when absorbed by the skin, greatly increases its sensitivity to sunlight. “Essentially,” says Tankersley, “you get a really, really bad sunburn.” Doctors treat the injury as a second-degree burn, though it is sometimes mistaken for poison ivy exposure.

Wild parsnip burns come from contact with the sap — which means you have to come into contact with a broken leaf or stem, rather than just brushing past an intact plant, to have the worst-case reaction. However, some people with sensitive skin have reported problems from exposure to leaves. And a few clumsy steps down a roadway embankment or off the hiking path could easily result in getting tangled up in broken stems. Days later, you’ll realize that those yellow flowers you saw as you tripped down the slope signaled the presence of a plant that’s the man-o-war jellyfish of the meadow.

Unfortunately, wild parsnip, which is classified as an invasive plant in the U.S., has become a lot more prevalent than those pesky jellyfish.

“Wild parsnip has been reported in every Illinois county, and it’s as ubiquitous in other Midwest states,” says Clair Ryan, the coordinator of the Midwest Invasive Plant Network. “And at the point an invasive plant is ubiquitous, it becomes impossible to eradicate.”

Early settlers to our area brought both the parsnip and the wild carrot — a related plant commonly known as Queen Anne’s lace — to our area, and both have thoroughly populated the region. In addition, there is a native variety, cow parsnip, that can produce the same skin reaction as the invasive parsnip but is much less prevalent.

With seeds that are spread by wind and birds, the wild parsnip has flourished along roadsides and “pretty much any habitat that would be suitable for it,” says Ryan. Road managers, she says, often effectively cope with the plant through carefully timed mowing, which must take place before seeds mature to control the population.

Tankersley recommends keeping an eye on your property if you have areas in which weeds might feel at home, so that you can deal with the parsnip before it matures — though he and Ryan advise caution if you plan to dig the weed out yourself. “You might want to hire somebody to do it,” Tankersley says.

If you do plan to be in areas where wild parsnip or other poisonous plants, such as poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac or giant hogweed (all found in Illinois, though some are far less prevalent than others) might be growing, it’s wise to remember a few basics:

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“We want people to know that just because something is green and growing doesn’t mean it’s awesome,” says Ryan. “But once you know how to identify the few plant species that are poisonous, there’s no reason to be afraid to go outside.” There are many resources for identifying wild parsnip and other dangerous plants online, and if you’re still stumped, the University of Illinois Extension offices are available to answer plant ID questions via email.

**Wear protective clothing.**

Experienced gardeners and outdoors enthusiasts will always be in long sleeves and pants, and closed shoes. Novices will often avoid these and suffer the consequences. That layer of clothing can protect you from poison ivy and parsnip burns. Just remember to carefully remove and wash your clothes afterward.

**Wash up.**

If you suspect you may have been in contact with a poisonous plant, the most important thing you can do is wash the affected area, as soon as possible. Removing sap or plant oils before they can be absorbed can help reduce a reaction.

**Stay out of the sun.**

There are many reasons to avoid the sun, including that it’s necessary to produce those parsnip burns if you’ve come in contact with the sap.

**Avoid your string trimmer.**

When it comes to parsnip or poison ivy removal, the string trimmer, with its blunt-force-trauma approach to cutting, is a dicey choice, since it can cause sap to spray.

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