



Wild Parsnip: You've Left That Burning Feeling!

Wild parsnip is another one of those invasive plant species that was brought to the Americas and was likely introduced as a plant to be used for food, or some decorative purpose. It's pretty to look at, but beware...to touch is to get burned!

It is relative to the carrot family, and grows three to four feet in height. During the summer months, it produces hundreds of little yellow flowers, which in turn produces large yellow seeds. These plants grow in areas varying from wetlands to prairies, CRP fields, and along roadsides. Once they start growing, they quickly spread to form a thick ground cover that's hard to get rid of.

What makes this plant so bad is there are chemicals in the leaves, stems and even the flowers that cause localized, intense burns, rashes and even blisters. It appears that contacting wild parsnip sap increases the skin's sensitivity to sunlight giving dermatitis like burn, some people call false or artificial sunburn. According to University of WI Extension, wild parsnip burns differ from the rash caused by poison ivy in several aspects. First, everyone is sensitive to wild parsnip and you do not need to be sensitized by a prior exposure to develop burns or blisters. You can brush against wild parsnip plants and not be burned. Parsnip is only dangerous when the plant sap from broken leaves or stems gets on your skin. Lastly, the wild parsnip's "burn" is usually less irritating than poison ivy's "itch".

The worst of the burning pain caused by wild parsnip is usually over within a couple of days while the rash and itch of poison ivy can last a long time.

The best advice here is to know what plants your skin has touched. If you have been in contact with this plant, and blisters have formed, keep the area clean, apply cool wet compresses and try not to let the blisters rupture as it protects the skin by keeping it moist and clean while the area heals. Be sure to consult your medical provider if there is extensive blistering.

Tips to avoid exposure include wearing gloves, long pants and long-sleeved shirts. Planning activities for the early evening will minimize sunlight and thus activation of the blistering process. If exposed to the plant juice, wash the contaminated areas thoroughly as soon as possible.

For further information, contact the Vernon County Health Department at 608-637-5251.