



Public Works Tool Box Talk

Wild Parsnip

Wild parsnip is an invasive Eurasian plant that grows in areas ranging from dry to wet prairies, roadsides, pastures and abandoned fields. Wild parsnip is shade tolerant but prefers sunny conditions. Due to the number of seeds a single plant can produce, once an infestation begins, it spreads across an area to form dense stands that are difficult to control.

Wild parsnip spends its first year(s) as a small cluster of leaves radiating around a stem at ground level, called a basal rosette. The following years the plant matures to reach an average of three to four feet in height. Flowering plants produce a single, thick stem that contains hundreds of small yellow flowers arranged in 2"-6" flat topped clusters; flowering occurs from the first of June to the middle of July (although some plants may continue flowering through mid-September). The flowers produce large pale yellow seeds. Leaves are alternate, pinnately compound, branched, and have saw-toothed edges. Each leaf has 5-15 oval/oblong leaflets with variable toothed edges and deep lobes.



Wild parsnip contains a chemical in the sap/juice (which impacts the entire plant - leaves, stems, flowers and seeds) that when in contact with skin causes intense, localized skin burning when exposed to sunlight. As it is in the juice, unlike poison ivy, you can touch and brush against an undamaged plant without any exposure.



Dermatitis from skin contact with the juice appears 24-48 hours after exposure. Burns from wild parsnip can be misdiagnosed as poison ivy as in mild cases, the affected skin reddens and feels sunburned. In more severe cases, the skin reddens first, then blisters. The affected area and blisters may produce a sensation similar to a mild to severe sunburn or a stinging, burning sensation. The blisters and „burned patches“ do not spread or itch, as poison ivy rashes. The resulting skin discoloration from the “burn” can last for several months.

Care should be taken to avoid skin contact with the juice of this plant. When walking in areas where wild parsnip exists, people should wear gloves, long pants and a long sleeved shirt to avoid contact. If contact has occurred and causes blisters, it is best to cover the affected area with a cool, wet cloth. Avoid letting the blisters rupture; if they do rupture leave the “skin bandage” in place. To avoid infection keep the area clean and apply antibiotic creams or powders as directed. For serious cases consult a doctor.