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### **Campbell River's Most Unwanted, Part 4 – Beware the giant hogweed, a human health hazard**

The blistering sap of the giant hogweed has earned this invasive a toxic label – and solidifies its position on the list of Campbell River's four most unwanted plants.

*"Giant hogweed sap combined with sunlight can cause severe burning and scarring and presents a health hazard for humans and animals, but luckily, the highly toxic giant hogweed is a relatively rare find in Campbell River,"* says Terri Martin, the City's environmental specialist. *"Giant hogweed is a particularly outstanding plant, due to its vigorous growth once established and sheer size. It is also a provincially-designated noxious weed, which imposes a duty on all landowners to control this plant where it occurs."*

#### **What's the problem? It truly is a threat...**

Giant hogweed poses a severe threat to human and animal health because its toxic sap (phytophototoxin) can cause painful recurring third-degree burns, blistering and scars on the skin, which can return up to 10 years after initial exposure.

*"I once worked with a contractor in the UK who accidentally got giant hogweed sap on his neck, and the phototoxicity required him to wear a bandana around his neck for the next five years to prevent it blistering in the sun,"* notes Cynthia Bendickson, operations manager at Greenways Land Trust.

WorkSafe BC has issued a toxic plant warning for giant hogweed that requires workers who may come in contact with the plant to wear heavy, water-resistant gloves and water-resistant coveralls that completely covers skin while handling the plants. Eye protection is also recommended.

Giant hogweed is a perennial introduced from Asia as an ornamental. Vigorous early-season growth, high seed production and tolerance of full shade and flooding gives it a strong competitive edge along waterways. When hogweed takes over it reduces habitat available for native plants and wildlife. Hogweed infestations also have less density and soil binding ability than native plants, leading to stream bank erosion.

South of Campbell River, in French Creek, hogweed that appeared in the watershed before the early 1960s is likely the oldest population in western Canada. The Coastal Invasive Species Committee is working with the Friends of French Creek, four local governments, three different provincial ministries, two forest companies and local landowners to unfurl a multi-year eradication program along more than 14 kilometres of the stream channel.

*"We certainly don't want the health risks associated with that level of infestation here in Campbell River or the costs that go along with treating such an infestation,"* Martin says.

#### **What's been done so far?**

City staff quickly remove any giant hogweed encountered periodically on City lands. Only one plant was found and dug out in 2017 along Myrt Thompson trail by Greenways Land Trust, and no plants were found in 2018.

*"With only a few plants on record on public property each year, it is relatively easy to keep on top of this plant, but it takes eyes in all areas of the community to keep a lookout and report sightings,"* Martin emphasizes.

#### **New this year – Environmental Protection Bylaw amendments**

Earlier this summer, the City adopted an amendment to the *Environmental Protection Bylaw* to regulate defined invasive plants and noxious weeds by restricting planting and requiring removal, with ticketing an option for non-compliance with the bylaw.

*“Currently, we have no records of anyone growing giant hogweed in their garden, and by raising public awareness, we aim to keep it that way,” Martin adds. “For all of the invasive plants that are being regulated, the City is working cooperatively with the community and Greenways Land Trust to control infestations.”*

### **How to identify giant hogweed from its harmless look-alike cow parsnip**

The locally abundant and native cow parsnip is often confused with giant hogweed.

*“Every time hogweed is in the news, the City gets numerous calls of concern, but so far they have all been parsnip sightings,” Martin says. “We find parsnip growing in some locations along the foreshore and along stream corridors.”*

Parsnip seems to be particularly abundant in the Quinsam area and around the Elk Falls trail.

### **How can you tell them apart?**

<b>Giant Hogweed – Invasive</b>	<b>Cow Parsnip – Native</b>
Leaves dark green, deeply serrated in three large segments, can be 2.5 metres long with stiff hairs	Leaves are not shiny, are more rounded, generally <0.5 metres wide with soft hairs
Stems green and hollow with purple spots	Stems usually green, lower portion may be purple (not streaked or spotted)
Grows up to five metres at maturity	Grows up to three metres at maturity
Blooms in mid-August, flower heads up to 1.5m in diameter	Blooms in July, flower heads 20 cm diameter
Both plants have numerous small white flowers clusters in an umbrella-shaped head	

### **What to do about giant hogweed on private property**

The plant only reproduces by seed – pieces of roots, leaves, and stems do not re-sprout like knotweed and ivy. Hogweed grows for three to five years before flowering and the plant dies in the last year. Cutting flower heads throughout the growing season is the most effective method to treat small infestations. Manual cutting of the tap root 10 cm below the soil surface using a sharp long-handled shovel or spade has been shown to be effective for smaller infestations of less than 100 plants. The seeds are viable in the soil for up to five years so some vigilance is required to eradicate a local population.

All removal methods carry a significant risk of exposure to the toxic sap. To minimize the risk, an invasive plant specialist can advise on best removal method, including the application of herbicides. People tackling these plants should wear protective clothing to ensure there is no exposed skin, gloves are essential and wear glasses or goggles. Wash all hand tools that been in contact with plant sap.

### **Grow native and regional plants instead**

The most important part of invasive plant management is prevention. Blue elderberry and wild celery are among the options listed in the *Grow Me Instead* booklet from the Invasive Species Council of BC. This publication profiles 26 of the province’s most unwanted horticultural plants and offers many suitable alternatives for a range of growing zones.

### **Notes on disposal**

The above ground portion of the plant can be left on site to decompose provided there is no risk that people or animals will touch them. If plants can’t be left to decompose or if the flower heads have gone to seed, the materials must be carefully bagged and taken to the Campbell River Waste Management

Centre (landfill) for disposal at a reduced tipping fee (\$65 per metric tonne). Because seeds can spread even after cutting flower heads, this species should not be placed in a backyard compost, curbside yard waste program or taken to the yard waste drop off centre on Willis Road.

Please report giant hogweed infestations to the City via email to [terri.martin@campbellriver.ca](mailto:terri.martin@campbellriver.ca)

#### **Additional resources**

- Local and provincial organizations, such as Greenways Land Trust, the Invasive Species Council of BC and the Coastal Invasive Species Committee are great places to dive deeper into all things concerning invasive plants.
- In this video, <https://bit.ly/2IFNXqG> Sandra Milligan from Greenways Land Trust points out the top five invasive species in and around Campbell River.
- The Invasive Species Council of BC is also an excellent source for many articles, images, and news on giant hogweed. Find them here: <https://bcinvasives.ca/>
- The mobile Report-a-Weed BC app lets people report noxious weeds anywhere in BC, in just a few simple steps. Reports go to a BC invasive plant specialist. Find the app here: <http://reportaweedbc.ca/>
- Campbell River Waste Management Centre details <https://www.cswm.ca/>
- [https://bcinvasives.ca/documents/Giant\\_Hogweed\\_TIPS\\_2017\\_WEB.pdf](https://bcinvasives.ca/documents/Giant_Hogweed_TIPS_2017_WEB.pdf)
- [https://bcinvasives.ca/documents/Giant\\_Hogweed\\_National\\_Factsheet.pdf](https://bcinvasives.ca/documents/Giant_Hogweed_National_Factsheet.pdf)

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Contact: Terri Martin, Environmental Specialist

250-286-5711

*Photos: "Giant Hogweed telephoto-R" AND "Hogweed removal 010"*