Guidance for Wildlife Wardens

Working Safely with Umbellifers and Plants with Hazardous Sap

The Apiaceae plant family, also known as umbellifers, can be easily recognised when they are in flower by their distinctive umbrella-shaped flower clusters – think cow parsley! This family includes many of our common native plants, often seen in hedgerows, woods, fields, and along roadsides, paths, and waterways. Some of these plants are incredibly useful, like carrots, while others are highly toxic, such as hemlock. While most people can identify cow parsley and hogweed, there are many more to watch out for!

Audrey and Vicky have spent a long time trying to find up-to-date information and research about these plants. It has been really difficult, with differing opinions and big gaps in knowledge about them. We've done our best, but please be aware your own personal experience may be different. As we learn more, we will update you in the WW newsletter. Please let us know of any of your own observations.

Our guidance reflects the significant risks posed by certain umbellifers, whose sap can cause burns, scarring, and photosensitisation[i] upon skin contact. These plants are often tall and, after strong winds or rain, may lean or fall over paths. If bent or broken, they can leak sap onto passers-by - a particular risk to children and some dogs.

Before any planned activity or task, please conduct a quick survey to check for the presence of hogweed, hemlock, hemlock water-dropwort, or giant hogweed. If any of these plants are identified, please do not carry out the work as a Wildlife Warden unless you have attended our Umbel Training, where you will learn about the very limited circumstances under which we can support such activities.

Cutting or handling this type of vegetation requires a very high level of personal protection — including **full face and skin coverage** — which is essential to keep health risks within acceptable limits. Additionally, there is a **significant concern that cut plant material may pose a hazard to the public** if not properly managed.

If a Council or landowner requests this type of work, kindly inform them that it isn't safe and explain the risks and potential consequences.

Credit: Lucy Smerdon

Look at the pictures and video links to help you to ID these plants. Lots of these plants look very similar so it is important you know what to look for and, if in doubt, double check with us or just steer clear! (Note: the videos have not been created by us, and we always recommend using several methods of identification if you are unsure).

Hemlock Water-Dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*)

A common plant in wet, marshy areas. All parts - but especially the roots - contain a potent neurotoxin called oenanthotoxin that can cause convulsions and death. It remains toxic when dried, and its sap can cause phytophotodermatitis.
Useful ID video: How to Identify Hemlock Water Dropwort

Useful ID video:
How to Identify Hemlock

Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)

Less common but can be locally abundant along hedgerows and in undisturbed fields. All parts of the plant contain coniine which can be fatal even in small amounts. Poisoning may occur through ingestion, skin contact, or inhalation of airborne particles. The sap can also cause photosensitivity.

Hogweed
(*Heracleum sphondylium*)

The sap of this very common plant can cause serious phytophotodermatitis after contact with the skin and exposure to UV light. This can lead to redness, blistering, and scarring. Healing can take a long time, and prolonged photosensitisation of the area and recurrence can be a significant problem.

Woodland Trust factsheet with ID pointers

Useful ID video –
but stop it to look, otherwise the words are hiding the plant!

Giant Hogweed
(*Heracleum mantegazzianum*)

This plant is very rare in Teignbridge, but can cause *extremely* serious burns, so should always be looked out for. Giant Hogweed grows much taller than Hogweed - but remember, even Hogweed can grow to over 2 metres (6’ 6”)!

Cow parsley and its look-alike cousins - some or all of these can also cause photosensitivity; if in doubt, use protective clothing.
Spurges (for example Dog’s mercury, wood spurge) - some people are sensitive to sap from spurges, again, use protective clothing.

We know that as an individual (**not** as a Wildlife Warden) you may choose to work with these plants, and you may even have them in your garden!

If you do here are some key points to think about when working with them:

- **Work should never be done in hot, sunny weather! Even when it is cloudy, UV levels can still be high, and burns can occur.** Limit working with these plants to very early morning or later in the evening when UV levels are lowest.

- Wear suitable protective clothing which should include face, neck, eye protection, thick gloves and a hat. Use synthetic, water resistant clothing as sap can seep through cotton and linen fibres.

- Have a container nearby with water, sponge, soap and eye wash kit available in case of any sap splashing.

- Sap can remain active on clothing and equipment for many hours after work has finished. Take care when removing clothing and wash thoroughly. Wash all equipment used carefully.

- Power tools should be avoided at all costs as this results in an airborne spray of pulverised plant material which is very hazardous.

- If skin does contact sap, wash carefully with soap and water as soon as possible. Keep the area covered from sunlight (even dull overcast days) for at least 48hrs and seek medical advice if concerned. Use suncream for months afterwards.

[1] Photosensitisation occurs when chemicals in certain plant sap make skin the extra sensitive to sunlight. If a person or animal gets plant sap on their skin which is then exposed to the UV in sunlight, these chemicals can cause a reaction that leads to redness, swelling, and even blistering, like a severe sunburn (phytophotodermatitis). This can lead to prolonged problems with skin healing, scarring and can reoccur.