MILLWARD FORESTRY

CONSULTANCY · CONTRACTING · WOODLAND MANAGEMENT

Giant Hogweed

History

Many foreign plants were introduced to Britain in the 19th century, mainly for ornamental reasons. A few have become aggressively dominant, creating serious problems in some areas. One such invasive plant is the Giant Hogweed (Heracleum mantagazzianum). It is now widespread throughout the British Isles especially along riverbanks. By forming dense strands they can displace native plants and reduce wildlife interests. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it an offence to plant or cause Giant Hogweed to grow in the wild.

Habitat

Giant Hogweed grows particularly well where the soil has been disturbed, such as on wasteground or on riverbanks, where erosion combined with a good supply of groundwater provide ideal conditions. During winter it causes soil erosion because Giant Hogweed dies off and exposes bare riverbanks where other plants would otherwise be. Because Giant Hogweed often grows in wet areas, it could be considered to be an invasive freshwater weed. Giant Hogweed may colonize a wide variety of habitats but is most common along roadsides, rights-of-way, waste ground, streams and rivers.

Giant Hogweed is a member of the parsley or carrot family, Apiaceae (Umbelliferae) and is native of Central Asia. As its name indicates, it is characterized by its size and may grow 5-7m (15-20 ft) tall. Except for size, it closely resembles Common Hogweed (Heracleum sphondylium). It is further distinguished by a stout, dark reddish-purple stem and spotted leaf stalks that are hollow and produce sturdy bristles. Stems vary from 5-10cm (2"-4") in diameter and the plant has deeply incised compound leaves which grow up to 1.7m (5 ft) in width. Giant Hogweed is a perennial with tuberous rootstalks which form perennating buds each year. It flowers mid-May through July, with numerous white flowers clustered in an umbrella-shaped head that is up to 0.8m (2.5 ft) in diameter across its flat top. The plant produces flattened, 1cm (3/8") long, oval dry fruits that have a broadly rounded base, and broad marginal ridges.

The Risks

Giant Hogweed is a public health hazard. The plant exudes a clear watery sap from the leaves and particularly the stem. The sap contains a glucoside called furanocoumarin, which renders skin photo-sensitive. This means that exposure to sunlight following contact causes severe blistering, burns to the affected areas and sometimes inflamed linear lesions on the skin. Blisters can develop into purplish or blackened scars. This reaction can occur up to 48 hours after contact and in some cases results in recurrent dermatitis. Contact with the eyes can lead to temporary or possibly permanent blindness.

Cases are often found where the plant has been strimmed, or where boys use the stems as swords or pea shooters. Neither should be done without protective clothing!!!

As the leaf hairs can penetrate fabrics, protective clothing should be worn to safeguard against contact with the sap.

If you do come into contact with the plant, you are advised to wash the affected areas immediately, keep them out of direct sunlight and seek medical advice at the earliest opportunity. Treatment with topical steroids early in the reaction can reduce its severity - this must be done after taking medical advice. Otherwise it is a case of preventing infection, covering with light dressings and waiting for recovery.

Control

Manual - The control of these plants by non-chemical methods should always be considered as the first option. However, this form of management is often labour intensive and time-consuming. Plants may be dug-out, but care should be taken to remove much of the root stalk. If done manually extreme care must be taken to ensure that the operator is fully covered, including a face shield, to ensure that there is no contact of bare skin with any part of the plant. Plant material must be disposed off to ensure there is no subsequent risk of any else touching it or that seeds are spread during removal. Mowing serves only to stimulate budding on the perennating rootstalk, but might be successful if done consistently and persistently enough to starve the rootstalk. Cattle, sheep, goats and pigs are also cited as possible methods of control as they eat giant hogweed without apparent harm, trampling also damages the plant.

Chemical - This should be considered only after non-chemical control has been evaluated and has proved impracticable. Properly used, the herbicide glyphosate is currently the most effective chemical control for Giant Hogweed. Glyphosate is a systematic herbicide that acts by blocking a plant's enzyme system. The herbicide is absorbed through growing leaves and stems where it is translocated throughout the plant and root network. It is quickly broken down in soil or sediment and kills virtually all annual and perennial weeds including grasses.

As Hogweed is often found along riverbanks care must be taken if using herbicide. Glyphosate is approved for use on or near water but it some cases official approval by the Environment agency may be required. If in doubt their advice should be sought. All operators need to be certified to apply herbicide and the correct protective clothing worn.

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