

Giant Hogweed

Giant Hogweed is a species common in the UK; not only does it create an environmental problem, contact with the plant may give rise to occupational health risks. The species is common along roads, footpaths and railway lines, rivers, wasteland, demolition sites and agricultural areas.

Over a period of four years, Giant Hogweed may grow to between three and five metres before flowering. With exception of its size, it bears a close resemblance to Cow Parsley and Hogweed. It has a reddish purple stem and spotted leaf stalks, with fine spines that make it appear furry. The leaves may expand to 1.5 metres in width with flower heads around 250 mm in width.



Giant Hogweed contains a substance within its sap that makes the skin sensitive to ultra violet light. As result of contact between the skin and sap, severe burns, associated swelling and painful blistering occur. Large watery blisters usually appear approximately 20 hours after contact with the sap and exposure to sunlight. The blisters heal very slowly, leaving residual pigmentation which may develop a type of dermatitis that flares up in sunlight known as Phytophotodermatitis. There is no straightforward treatment.

Giant Hogweed is an aggressive competitor able to out-compete native plant species, reducing the habitat available for insects, birds and mammals. It produces up to 1,500 seeds per flower head in late summer. These seeds can remain inactive in the soil for several years.

Giant Hogweed dies back during the winter months leaving bare ground that can cause an increase in soil erosion on riverbanks and steep slopes. Giant Hogweed is a foreign invader that prevents native plant species from growing. Under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 it is an offence to 'plant or otherwise cause Giant Hogweed to grow' in the wild. This includes spreading the species or transferring polluted ground material from one area to another.

Control of Giant Hogweed

There are a number of options available for the treatment of this species, the majority of these take a number of years to be effective. Outlined below are the most effective methods.

Herbicide Treatment

Spraying with an appropriate herbicide is the most effective treatment option available. It can take several years to eradicate these species as the soil beneath an established stand will contain thousands of seeds that will continue to produce new plants. Repeated applications may be necessary. One of the most effective herbicides contains the active ingredient Glyphosate.

Spraying can only be carried out during the growing season (March to August) and operators must hold a Certificate of Competence for herbicide use.

Digging and Spraying

An environmentally friendlier and quicker method of removing Giant Hogweed involves the clearing of above ground leaf/stem material and the removal of ground material polluted with roots and seeds.

Due to the risk of contact with sap from this plant, removal by hand should be restricted and not considered once the plant has grown above one metre in height. It is vital to minimize the risk to workers' skin exposed to the plants, particularly the sap.

Do not rotary cut or strim plants as this may cause the sap and stems to become an airborne hazard.

The majority of seeds that are produced fall to the ground within four metres of the parent plant. This area should be considered as polluted, dug out and removed.

Bags/skips containing Giant Hogweed or polluted soil leaving the site should be covered to avoid contamination along public highways. Hazardous waste transfer documentation will be required for any waste material leaving the site.

Any re-growth should be treated with herbicide as discussed above.