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A rash decision

Giant hogweed is pretty but it can take over your garden and send you to the hospital

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THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
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It wasn't a rash decision, but when Dundas landscape designer Steve Millen bought a tropical looking plant at a front yard plant sale he didn't know it would take over his garden and send him and another gardener to hospital.

"I wanted something that looked like elephant ears," Millen says forlornly. What he got was an obnoxious but beautiful weed with many names including cow parsnip, giant hogweed and wild rhubarb. The proper name is Heracleum. It looks like Queen Ann's lace on steroids and it might be on its way to a garden near you.

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Millen planted just one, but now his garden, which includes a large pond, is infested with giant hogweed. After three years, with the plant marching its way across his property, Millen decided it was time to eradicate the invader. "I hired another guy and we cut down hundreds of plants on a hot sunny day, and the next thing I hear, the kid is in the hospital."

Millen didn't know what the plant was and certainly didn't know that getting the sap on your skin can cause a severe case of contact dermatitis in susceptible people. First the skin turns red, then it itches and burns, especially when exposed to sun. "I had doctors calling me from the General (hospital), demanding I bring in plant samples." Millen's rash was brought under control after a visit to a dermatologist, his hired hand was in the hospital for three days.

Dermatologist Dr. Peter Vignjevic sees many cases of contact dermatitis in his Hamilton office, usually from poison ivy, oak or sumac.

"The treatment is usually avoidance, steroid creams, and rarely oral steroids. It's not a life threatening problem, but when severe can cause widespread blistering, itching, and pain." Ironically Vignjevic was just about to plant a hogweed. "My neighbour has that. I thought it was called Chilean

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rhubarb (gunnera) and I wanted to plant one."

Hogweed was introduced from Europe as an ornamental plant, and has escaped to form stands along stream banks, and roadsides. It continues to make its way into gardens, including a very impressive patch I saw in a downtown Burlington yard.

On the Ontario Weeds website (ontarioweeds.com) it's listed as a serious health hazard to humans, but it is not on the Ministry of Agriculture noxious weeds list (www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/noxious_weeds.htm), presumably because it is not a threat to crops or livestock.

Giant hogweed reproduces from seed, and as Millen can attest to, it produces thousands of seeds each season. Since cutting it down isn't an option, Millen's only choice might be to spray it.

Suzanne Durst, Pesticides Specialist with the Ministry of the Environment in Hamilton says an exemption allows pesticides to be used on plants that are poisonous to the touch.

"This exception allows the use of any product containing a class 10 ingredient (i.e. glyphosate, contained in products such as Roundup) to control a plant poisonous to the touch. Poison ivy, poison sumac and giant hogweed are examples of these plants. This landowner could either purchase the product in a ready-to-use format at a local vendor, for example a hardware store or home improvement centre, or could contract a licensed land exterminator."

At the Royal Botanical Gardens, pest specialist Bill Senazi calls hogweed a hardcore pest. In addition to applying Roundup to the stems, Senazi recommends removing flower heads before they seed.

"If there are a lot of plants, it might be best to hire a licensed exterminator."

Hogweed is on the move in Ontario, Durst is receiving more calls about it in Hamilton, and says the plant especially troublesome in the Kitchener-Waterloo area. What Steve Millen has to look forward to is cleaning up from a plant sale purchase that seemed benign but turned into pretty poison.

Kathy Renwald is producer and host of Gardener's Journal. kathyrenwald.com

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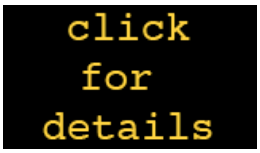

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