

Invasive Plants in Pennsylvania

Wild parsnip

Pastinaca sativa



Brett Pifer, DCNR - BOF

Background:

Wild parsnip is believed to have been brought to the United States as a food source. Its thick, edible taproot is still grown today, and a variety of cultivars are available.



Ohio State Weed Lab Archive, Ohio State Univ.

Biology and Spread:

This species reproduces readily from seed. It will slowly invade an area in waves following an initial infestation. Once the population builds, however, it spreads rapidly. Seeds may be dispersed by mowing equipment and vehicles.

Description:

Wild parsnip is a biennial or perennial herbaceous plant that can reach two to five feet tall. Its basal leaves are pinnately compound with saw-toothed edges. Branching stems with reduced, sessile leaves bear umbels of small, yellow flowers from mid-June to early August. Wild parsnip produces broad, oval seeds before dying off.



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Habitat:

Tolerant of a wide range of open conditions, wild parsnip can be found in dry mesic and wet mesic prairies, roadsides, disturbed sites, waste places, oak openings and calcareous fens. This plant is shade-intolerant, preferring sunny conditions. It grows best on calcareous, alkaline soils.

Look-A-Likes:

From a distance, wild parsnip may resemble other large members of the carrot family, such as the invasive poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Photos can be referenced on pages 9-11 of this guide.

Ecological Threat:

Well-established prairies are not likely to be invaded by wild parsnip, but it can become abundant on prairie edges and in disturbed patches. Once established in peripheral sites, it can spread into adjacent high-quality areas. It can quickly displace native vegetation. Some people are sensitive to the leaves and sap, getting a painful rash in the presence of sunlight.

How to Control this Species:

Use caution when removing this plant. Chemicals in the leaves, stems, flowers and fruits can cause a burning rash or blistering reaction when coming in contact with the skin.

The best control is achieved through hand-pulling. Wild parsnip is easiest to pull after a good rain or during a drought when the roots shrink.

Plants can also be cut below the root crown, preferably as soon as the blooms show, but have not yet matured. Mowing must be done often for effective control.

A two percent spot application of glyphosate to basal rosettes is a recommended treatment. This should be done in late fall after most native vegetation is dormant.



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How to Control this Species:

Physical

Use caution when removing this plant. Chemicals in the leaves, stems, flowers and fruits can cause a burning rash or blistering reaction when coming in contact with the skin.

Early detection and eradication is encouraged.

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Plants can also be cut below the root crown, preferably as soon as the blooms show, but have not yet matured.

The area should be rechecked for several weeks. Several years of treatment may be necessary.

Mowing must be done often for effective control, but this practice also reduces native competitors.

Chemical

A two percent spot application of glyphosate to basal rosettes is a recommended treatment. This should be done in late fall after most native vegetation is dormant.

Look-A-Likes:

From a distance, wild parsnip may resemble other large members of the carrot family, such as the invasive poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*).



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