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GTA

Beware, Scarborough hikers. The dangerous cow parsnip is flourishing in a Bluffs woodlot in the Guild Inn Park and Gardens

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Watch your step when straying off the path in swampy parts of city parks. You might brush up against cow parsnip, and wish you hadn't.

My daily COVID-busting trudges along the Scarborough Bluffs take me into the Guild Inn Park and Gardens, via a recreational trail that leads from Livingston Road into the back of the park, along the edge of the bluffs.

I've been using the same trail for many years but never before have I seen such a proliferation of cow parsnip as in 2021; it's thick in the woodlot that's part of the park, with many plants within a few metres of the path.

Cow parsnip is part of the same family that includes giant hogweed and wild parsnip. All three emit a sap that can be big trouble if it gets on skin that is subsequently exposed to sunlight. It can cause serious blistering, burns and even blindness, in extreme cases. But giant hogweed is by far the worst.

A few years ago I noticed a sign at the entrance to the path, near Livingston, that included a photo of cow parsnip and a warning to stay away from it. But the sign is off to one side and doesn't say why it should be avoided.

I read up on cow parsnip and kept an eye out for it but never spotted any until this year, when I can count upwards of a dozen plants – some nearly two metres tall – within a few metres of the trail.

At this time of year it's not unusual to see hundreds of people in the Guild park on a nice day. I often see people stray off the path and wander into the woods, to chase a dog or shoot photos of birds, or whatever.

I doubt that many have noticed the sign, could identify cow parsnip or have any idea that brushing up against the noxious plant could be a painful and regrettable mistake.

STATUS: I sent a note to the city, asking if it has a policy on cow parsnip and what it'll do about them in the Guild park woodlot. I also talked to Paul Ainslie, the local city councillor (Scarborough-Guildwood), who expressed concern that park visitors could come into contact with it and be injured. Here's the city's reply: "Parks and Urban Forestry staff routinely monitor parks, trails and green spaces for hazardous and invasive plant species and take action where necessary. Guild Park is home to Cow Parsnip, which is a native plant that supports many pollinating insects and is part of the native ecosystem in this area. The City has installed signs at trail entrances if there is hazardous vegetation nearby. Due to potential health and safety risks, cow parsnip plants will be removed from the immediate trail edges within one metre of the trails throughout the park." They also wrote that the natural environment areas beyond the mow strip, for example the woodlots, are the purview of Forestry, and are usually left

to provide benefits to area wildlife. “Giant hogweed and/or cow parsnip has been identified and actively controlled in many parks and trails across the city. Residents should not attempt to remove cow parsnip themselves and can report the plants by calling 311.”

Ainslie told me he got in touch with a parks official after we talked and was told that they’d be putting up more signage to warn people. That’s great, but it would be even better if the city expanded the zone in which it will remove cow parsnip from one metre to within three metres of the path. That would take out a lot of it.

I’m interested to hear from people who have seen cow parsnip, wild parsnip or giant hogweed in city parks, or if they’ve learned the hard way about its danger. Photos — even of blisters — are always welcome.

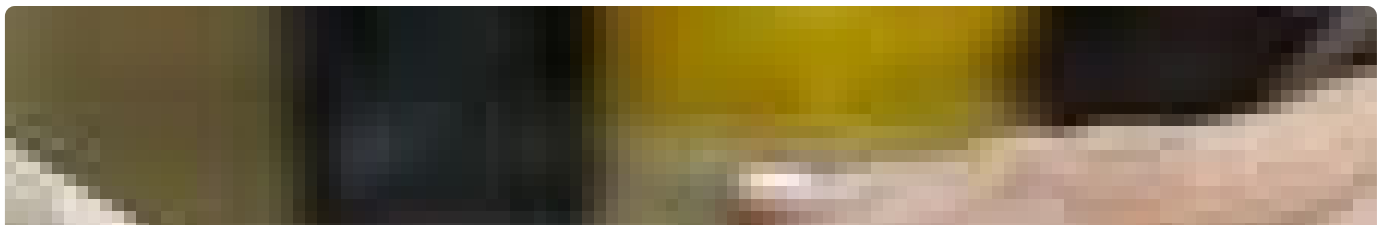
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