Amenity Forum Guidance Document

Best Practice Note for Giant Hogweed Control

Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) is covered by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, meaning it is an offence to cause the plant to spread or grow in the wild. Landowners may also be subject to enforcement under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill 2014.

Plant material and soils containing the plant or its seeds are all classed as controlled waste for the purposes of the Environment Protection Act 1990 and must be disposed of at a licensed landfill site in accordance with the Act. This applies whether the material is alive or dead.

All parts of the plant contain chemicals called furanocoumarins, which are hazardous to human health. Furanocoumarins break down compounds in the skin, causing extreme sensitivity to ultraviolet light (phytophotodermatitis). Contactbetween even a small amount of chemical with the eyes can cause temporary or permanent blindness.

Giant hogweed is a biennial plant which can grow up to 5m in height. Stems are thick and hairy, with ridges running along them. Stems are generally green with purple flecks, but can also appear entirely purple. The plant forms large, domed clusters of white flowers which can measure up to 0.5m across.

The plant can normally be distinguished from other related plants (including native hogweed) by its sheer size, including the leaves, which often grow over 1m long. Additionally, the leaves appear more jagged and sharp-edged than those of its cousins.

The plant can be found in most areas of the UK and Ireland, and is particularly common along river corridors. The plant spreads by seed – estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000 seeds produced per flowering plant.

Safety and human health should be the primary concern when treating giant hogweed. Suitable COSHH assessments, risk assessments and safe systems of work are required. In all cases, control of giant hogweed should be accompanied by stringent safety controls, including appropriate safety equipment and post-treatment decontamination of all equipment used. Use of strimming or other methods likely to cause the ejection of plant material should be avoided, where possible.

Timing of treatment is important, as there is a relatively short window between the plant starting to grow and producing flower heads in late spring or early summer. Growth has been noted in the UK in March and as early as January during mild winters. In all cases, treatment should be carried out before the plant has chance to form seeds.

Cutting back surface growth is unlikely to cause plants to die, but removing or severing the tap root (grubbing) will generally kill individual plants, though grubbing may sometimes need to be repeated to ensure success. Due to the extensive seed bank and pervasiveness of seeds, successful control is likely to take multiple seasons of treatment. This can be complicated further by the ability of the large number of seeds to travel significant distances from neaby infestations.

Chemical herbicide treatment of emergent plants can be accomplished by methods including herbicides with residual action, and foliar application of translocated herbicides, once the plant has developed fully-formed leaves. Consult your supplier / agronomist for advice on suitable herbicides and the directions and restrictions on their use, and always apply as directed.

Environment Agency approval is required before using herbicides in aquatic areas. The Sustainable Use Directive expressly requires that herbicide use should be minimised in these areas – but a balance must be sought between the necessity of control, and safe working practices to protect health and safety.

Further Reading:

UK Government Guidance Note on the reform of anti-social behaviour powers
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364846/Japanese_Knotweed_information_note.pdf