



Amenity Forum

Guidance Note

Giant Hogweed Control



Introduction

Giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*) 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.

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, which can result in severe burns on exposure to sunlight (phytophotodermatitis). Contact between even a small amount of chemical and the eyes can cause temporary or permanent blindness.

Giant hogweed appears on the UK's List of Species of Special Concern (the UK's post-Brexit equivalent of the European Union's List of Invasive Species of Union Concern) and is therefore covered by the provisions of both the Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order 2019 and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

It is an offence to plant or cause to grow these plants in the wild, or to release them into the environment. Landowners or land managers may also be subject to enforcement under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill 2014 if they allow plants on their land to cause an impact to amenity.

When considering excavation, plant material and soils containing giant hogweed, or its seeds may all be classified as controlled waste for the purposes of the Environment Protection Act 1990 (EPA) and must be disposed of at a licensed landfill site in accordance with the Act and any burial or burning must either be subject to an environmental permit or carried out in line with the EA's RPS 178. Disposal can be expensive, with potential for cross-contamination and with little practical benefit compared to other treatment methods.

Safety and human health should be the primary concern when treating giant hogweed and competent advice must be obtained before carrying out works. 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, personal protective equipment and post-treatment decontamination of all equipment and PPE used. Consideration should also be given to the management of any arisings, particularly if these are stockpiled near to public areas. Use of strimming or other methods likely to cause the ejection of plant material should be avoided in all cases.

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 is often seen in the UK in March and has been noted as early as January during mild winters. In all cases, surface treatment should be carried out before the plant has chance to form seeds – but any herbicide treatment must be in line with the product label.

When planning treatment in line with integrated pest management principles, several options are available but may be hampered by safety concerns.

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

Mechanical removal or relocation of plants, soils and seed bank is recommended only where this can be achieved via suitable means (e.g. mechanical plant) to prevent contact between operatives and hazardous materials. Such works are likely to be subject to the EPA (or the EA's RPS178).

Chemical herbicide treatment can be accomplished by methods including herbicides with residual action, and foliar application of translocated herbicides to plants with 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.

Local environmental agency approval is required before using herbicides in aquatic areas (and conditions will vary from territory to territory). 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

UK List of Species of Special Concern

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/invasive-non-native-alien-plant-species-rules-in-england-and-wales#list-of-invasive-plant-species>

UK legislation – Wildlife and Countryside Act Schedule 9

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/9>

Environment Agency guidance RPS178

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/treatment-and-disposal-of-invasive-non-native-plants-rps-178/treatment-and-disposal-of-invasive-non-native-plants-rps-178>

Information on the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014

<https://www.brickfieldspark.org/miscdata/japaneseknotweedinformationnote.pdf>