

Highway Crew Hazard: Nuisance Vegetation

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During late spring and throughout the summer, highway crews need to mow roadsides, trim weeds, and maintain highway right-of-way areas – tasks which can expose workers to vegetation that often causes chemical burns and serious skin irritation. The most common of these hazardous plants are poison ivy and wild parsnip. Other plants that also pose problems but are less common in Vermont include poison oak, poison sumac, and giant hogweed. To avoid injury, employees must be able to identify these plants, use the proper protective equipment, and follow the proper procedures to clean up and dispose of plant residues.

It is important that you teach your employees how to identify these common roadside plants. We provide some photos in this article, but we encourage you to visit the website of the [Centers for Disease Control](#), [Vermont Department of Health](#), [U.S. Fish and Wildlife](#), and [Vermont Local Roads](#) for more photos and detailed descriptions of these nuisance plants.

Once employees can identify the plants, they should understand these basic work practices and protective measures:

1. Identify where the plants are before starting work, take the right PPE to the worksite, and use the right work practices for the task.
2. Prevent exposure by wearing proper clothing when contact is expected. As a minimum, wear long sleeves, long pants, boots, eye protection, and gloves.
3. Avoid contact with the juice or sap from these plants as much as possible. Avoiding all contact is best.
4. Recognize that tools and equipment that have come into contact with the plant residues are sources of exposure to the plant residue. Wash these with water and avoid skin contact. Wear rubber or similar gloves when washing tools, then thoroughly rinse or discard the gloves after use.
5. If clothing comes into contact with sap or plant residue, isolate these items and launder them separately from other fabrics.

6. Do not burn plants that may be poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac. The combustion by-products can cause severe allergic respiratory problems for anyone in the immediate area.

If exposed skin comes into contact with the sap or plant residue, wash the skin thoroughly with soap and water as soon as possible. **Wild parsnip and giant hogweed react to ultraviolet light, so it's important to keep affected skin out of the sunlight for 24 to 48 hours.** For minor reactions, employees may use wet compresses, calamine lotion, or hydrocortisone cream to reduce swelling and control itching. If severe reactions occur, make sure the employee seeks immediate medical attention.

Your best line of defense against injury is to train employees to identify these plants and use suitable protective garments and work practices when cutting and removing them. Contact your VLCT PACIF loss control consultant or email losscontrol@vlct.org if you have questions or need additional guidance.