

Wild Parsnip

(*Pastinaca sativa*)



Family name: Apiaceae (Carrot family)

Common name/s: Wild Parsnip, Field Parsnip, Common Parsnip



Wild Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) is a tall, biennial herb known for its yellow flower clusters and thick taproot. In Ireland, it is naturalised and commonly found in roadsides, grasslands, and disturbed areas. The plant spreads through prolific seed production and can outcompete native species in some habitats.

Management strategies include mowing, hand-pulling, and herbicide application, with precautions needed to avoid skin contact with its sap. If left unmanaged, Wild Parsnip can significantly impact local ecosystems and pose a health risk due to its irritating sap.

Description - Wild Parsnip is a tall, biennial herbaceous plant known for its yellow, umbrella-shaped flower clusters and large, lobed leaves. It has become widespread in many parts of the world. The plant is noted for its potential to cause skin irritation through contact with its sap, which can make management challenging.

Key characteristics include:

Height: Grows to a height of 0.5 to 1.5 metres, though it can reach up to 2 metres in some cases.



Leaves: The leaves are pinnately compound, with 5-15 leaflets that are ovate to oblong in shape and have coarsely toothed edges. The lower leaves can grow up to 30 cm long, while the upper leaves are smaller.



Flowers: Produces yellow, umbrella-shaped flower clusters (umbels), which can be 10-20 cm in diameter. The flowers bloom from late spring to early autumn and consist of numerous small, five-petaled flowers.

Fruit: Forms flat, oval-shaped seeds that are ribbed and brown when mature. The seeds are 2.5-5 mm long and can be dispersed by wind or water.



Stem: The stems are hollow, grooved, and branched, with a green to yellowish-green colour.

Root: The plant has a thick, cream-coloured taproot, which resembles the cultivated parsnip used in cooking, although wild parsnip roots are often smaller and more fibrous.



Habitat - Wild Parsnip is native to Europe and Asia but has spread widely to other temperate regions, including North America and parts of Australia. Its preferred habitats include:

- **Roadsides and Railway Embankments:** Frequently found along roadsides, railways, and ditches, where it can establish quickly in disturbed soils.
- **Grasslands and Meadows:** Common in open fields, grasslands, and meadows, particularly in areas with rich, well-drained soils.
- **Abandoned Fields and Waste Areas:** Thrives in disturbed sites and marginal lands where other vegetation is less competitive.

The plant prefers full sun and grows well in a variety of soil types, from sandy to clay soils, although it favours moist, well-drained conditions.

Status in Ireland - In Ireland, Wild Parsnip is naturalised and common in many areas, particularly along roadsides, grasslands, and disturbed sites. It is not considered a highly invasive species but can spread rapidly in certain environments, potentially impacting native plant communities and posing a risk to human health due to skin irritation from its sap.

Reproduction and Spread - Wild Parsnip reproduces through seed production:

- **Seed Dispersal:** The seeds are dispersed by wind, water, and human activities, such as mowing and the movement of soil. Each plant can produce hundreds to thousands of seeds, which can remain viable in the soil for several years.
- **Biennial Lifecycle:** The plant typically grows as a rosette in its first year and flowers in its second year, after which it dies. This lifecycle allows it to establish a persistent seed bank in suitable habitats.

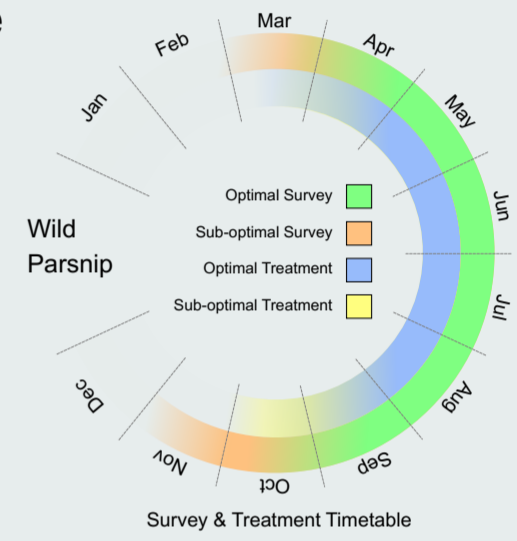
Management and Control - Managing Wild Parsnip involves controlling its spread and reducing the risks associated with skin contact:

- **Mechanical Control:** Mowing or cutting the plants before they flower can help prevent seed production, though repeated mowing may be necessary to exhaust the plant's energy reserves.

Hand-pulling or digging out the taproot can be effective for small infestations, but protective clothing should be worn to avoid skin contact with the sap.

- **Chemical Control:** Herbicides may be used for larger infestations, especially in areas where mechanical control is impractical. Application is most effective on young plants or rosettes before they flower.

- **Preventative Measures:** Monitoring disturbed areas and road verges for early signs of growth and prompt removal of plants can help prevent the establishment of large infestations.



Ecological Impact - Wild Parsnip can have several ecological impacts in areas where it becomes established:

- **Competition with Native Species:** Can outcompete native plants, particularly in disturbed habitats, reducing biodiversity.
- **Alteration of Grassland Structure:** Dense stands of Wild Parsnip can dominate open areas, changing the composition of grassland and meadow ecosystems.

- **Human Health Risk:** The plant's sap contains photosensitising chemicals (furanocoumarins) that can cause skin irritation, blistering, and burns when exposed to sunlight, posing a risk to people who come into contact with it.



For further information and free advice, please contact:
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