



Oregon Sea Grant Extension
Sustainable Tourism &
Outdoor Recreation Program

Interpretative Fact Sheet Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*)

 tourism.oregonstate.edu/cow-parsnip-heracleum-lanatum/

By colliek2

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Cow Parsnips hang out with the wrong crowd.

They are somewhat toxic...sure. But really, it's their ***bad news neighbors*** like Hog weed (sap can cause severe blisters and blindness) and Spotted water hemlock (the most deadly plant in North America) to really watch out for. **NOTE:** There are more than just these two!

By comparison, Cow Parsnip, is a walk in the park with blister scars and pigmentation only lasting for months or years.



Cow parsnip flower (courtesy of OSU, Weed Species program)

Distribution

Cow Parsnips are a North American native. It is found in almost every area within USDA plant hardiness zones 4a to 10a.

This plant is heavily found in Alaska. It is, like most plants, invasive in some areas, yet considered 'endangered' or of 'special concern' in others.

H. lanatum will grow in areas with full sun to partial shade. It will also tolerate a variety of soils if enough moisture and drainage is provided. Typically, this plant grows along roadsides and drainage ditches.

Identification

The flower of *H. lanatum* is very similar to other members of the carrot family. Small white flowers cover the umbrella looking bloom that can reach eight-inches across. The leaves are very large (up to 16 inches), and the plant can reach nearly ten feet tall!

Being so tall makes it easy to look at the stout stem. The stem should be green and hairy. Stems for Spotted water hemlock are not hairy and Hogweed has purplish-red spots.

Knowing the differences can save your life.

Current Use

Cow Parsnip often colonizes areas that frequently burn and has been used for post-fire colonizing and soil erosion stabilization. The plant is not fire resistant.

This plant can be an important food source for many animals such as livestock, deer, bear, moose, elk, upland game birds, waterfowl, and small mammals. It also functions as a wildlife larval host for butterflies and bees.

Livestock (such as horses, cows, goats, and sheep) sometimes have a hard time figuring out which plant is safe to eat. Water hemlock poisoning common and causes death in livestock in as little as 15 minutes.

Past Uses

Indigenous people and American settlers sought out the plant as food. Young stems and thick flower stalks resemble celery (which gave rise to the common name “Indian celery”).

Stalks were peeled (required) and eaten raw or cooked. These stems resembled celery (which gave rise to the common name “Indian celery”).

Traditionally, Cow parsnip is used for treating skin problems (such as bruises or sores).

Warning! The clear sap can cause blisters and hyperpigmentation after exposure to ultraviolet light. The scars and pigmentation can last a long time.

Before handling or consuming this plant be sure to learn more about how to protect yourself. **USE CAUTION PLEASE.**

REFERENCES:

- Oregon State University, Nursery Weeds and photos (https://oregonstate.edu/dept/nursery-weeds/weedspeciespage/cow_parsnip/Cow_parsnip_Heracleum_lanatum_page.html)
- Plant Database (<https://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=hema80>)
- USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service



Cow Parsnip stem (courtesy of OSU, Weed Species program)

(<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/heracleum-maximum/>)

–USDA, Forest Service

(<https://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/forb/hermax/all.html>)

–Wikipedia (including: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heracleum_maximum and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cicuta_maculata)