Noxious Plant Field Card

Identification and immediate response · Canadian outdoor crews

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Employer / company: _____ Crew or work area: _____

Issued to: _____ Season / year: _____

THE TWO MECHANISMS THAT MATTER

MECHANISM	WHAT HAPPENS	WHY THE RESPONSE DIFFERS
Phototoxic (sap + sunlight)	Sap chemicals react with UV light and burn the skin. Not an allergy — anyone exposed reacts.	Getting out of sunlight matters as much as washing. Cover the skin immediately.
Allergic contact dermatitis	An oil triggers an immune reaction. Severity varies between people and builds with exposure.	Wash off the oil fast, and decontaminate clothing and tools that carry it.
Mechanical	Physical needles or spines inject irritants on contact.	Usually short-lived. Matters most because a startled worker may fall or drop a tool.

1. GIANT HOGWEED — THE MOST DANGEROUS

FEATURE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Height	Up to five metres — far taller than anything around it.
Stem	Hollow, thick, with coarse bristles and purple blotches.
Flowers	Large white clusters, umbrella-shaped, can reach 80 cm across.
Where	Roadsides, waterways, disturbed land. Documented in Ontario, BC, Quebec and the Atlantic provinces.
Harm	Phototoxic. Sap on the skin followed by sunlight causes severe burns. Symptoms occur within 48 hours and consist of painful blisters. Purplish scars can last for many years. Eye contact with the sap has been reported to cause temporary or permanent blindness, although Ontario notes that permanent blindness cannot be substantiated by existing research.

This is not an allergic reaction. Anyone who gets the sap on their skin and then steps into sunlight will burn. There is no such thing as not being sensitive to it.

2. WILD PARSNIP — THE ONE CREWS MISS MOST

FEATURE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Height	Smaller than giant hogweed, typically waist to chest height.
Flowers	Flat-topped **yellow** clusters — the quickest way to tell it from hogweed.
Stem	Hollow, grooved, green.
Where	Roadside ditches and unmaintained right-of-ways. Reported in all provinces and territories except Nunavut, and abundant along Ontario's 400-series corridors and rural right-of-ways.
Harm	Same phototoxic mechanism as giant hogweed. Responsible for more documented workplace injuries in eastern Canada simply because it is far more common. Mowing an infested area without PPE has produced burns across an entire crew.

3. POISON IVY

FEATURE	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Leaves	Three leaflets on each stalk. Glossy in spring, red in autumn.
Form	Ground cover, shrub or climbing vine.
Where	Fence lines, disturbed soil, forest margins. Every province except Newfoundland and Labrador.
Harm	Urushiol oil causes allergic contact dermatitis. Present in every part of the plant year-round, **including dead vines in winter**. Most people develop symptoms 24 to 48 hours after contact, and the rash spreads via contaminated clothing, gloves and tools.

4. STINGING NETTLE AND 5. COW PARSNIP

PLANT	IDENTIFICATION	HARM
Stinging nettle	Toothed leaves with fine hairs on leaves and stems. Moist, disturbed ground across the country.	Hollow silica needles inject formic acid and histamine. Immediate pain, generally short-lived. Main risk is a startled worker falling or dropping a tool.
Cow parsnip	Native, smaller than giant hogweed, white flower clusters. Common in BC and Alberta.	Same phototoxic mechanism, less potent. Treat as hogweed until identified with confidence.

> **Identification errors go both ways.** Workers unfamiliar with giant hogweed sometimes dismiss it as cow parsnip — and sometimes report cow parsnip as hogweed. If the crew cannot tell them apart with confidence, treat every tall white-flowered umbellifer as giant hogweed.

IF A WORKER IS EXPOSED — PHOTOTOXIC SAP

- [ ] **Cover the skin from sunlight immediately** — clothing, a towel, anything opaque. Do this first.
- [ ] Wash the area thoroughly with soap and water. **Do not rub the skin.**
- [ ] Get out of the sun and stay out of the sun for at least 48 hours, even if nothing is visible yet.
- [ ] If sap contacted the eyes, flush with clean water immediately and seek medical attention.
- [ ] See a physician as soon as possible — corticosteroids prescribed early can reduce blistering severity.
- [ ] Record it as a workplace incident and review the hazard assessment.

> **No visible reaction does not mean no exposure.** The burn develops after UV exposure, not on contact. A worker who feels fine at noon can blister badly by the following evening.

IF A WORKER IS EXPOSED — URUSHIOL (POISON IVY)

- [ ] Wash skin with soap and cool water as soon as possible — speed matters more than technique.
- [ ] Wash all clothing, gloves, boots and tools separately. The oil transfers and re-exposes.
- [ ] Do not burn cut vegetation. Inhaling smoke containing urushiol can cause serious respiratory injury.
- [ ] Seek medical attention for widespread rash, facial involvement, or any breathing difficulty.

CONTROLS BEFORE THE SEASON

REQUIREMENT	WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE	Y / N / N-A	EVIDENCE OR GAP
Plants in the hazard assessment	Noxious plants named as a hazard for the areas your crews work.		
Pre-season crew briefing	Delivered before the growing season, with identification photos.		
PPE specified	Impermeable gloves, long sleeves, eye protection for mowing or brushing infested areas.		
Wash facilities available	Soap and water accessible on site or in vehicles.		
Known infestations mapped	Locations recorded and flagged for crews before they arrive.		
Mowing controls	Procedure for mowing or trimming infested ground, including downwind and spray considerations.		

Pre-Season Crew Briefing Record

Retain with your hazard assessment records

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Employer / company: _____ Date of briefing: _____

Delivered by: _____ Work area covered: _____

CONTENT COVERED

- ☐ The five plants and how to identify each
- ☐ Phototoxic versus allergic mechanism and why the response differs
- ☐ Immediate response steps for sap exposure
- ☐ PPE required for this crew's work
- ☐ Known infestation locations in our work area
- ☐ How and to whom to report an exposure

KNOWN INFESTATIONS IN OUR WORK AREA

LOCATION	PLANT	IDENTIFIED BY	DATE

CREW ATTENDANCE

NAME (PRINT)	SIGNATURE	DATE

SIGN-OFF

_____ _____

BRIEFING DELIVERED BY DATE

_____ _____

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE DATE

Want help applying this?

Our consultants (CRSP Certified · COR & ISO 45001 Lead Auditors) can adapt this to your workplace or review your safety program with you.

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Noxious Plant Field Identification Checklist · Version 1.1 · Reviewed October 2026 · HSE Advisor Canada. Free to use and adapt. General guidance, not legal advice.

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