

# Perilous plant

STORY AND PHOTOS: RAMESH POORAN

## Invasive plant can cause severe skin burns

**G**olden yellow flowers branching umbrella-like atop tall stems and nodding gracefully in the wind have been a common sight along County roads over the past few years. Now, however, the plant can increasingly be found in parks, gardens, open fields and even along parts of the Millennium Trail. This is wild parsnip, an invasive plant that bears a toxic touch. The plant, which has an edible root, was likely brought over by European settlers about 400 years ago. The sap of the plant contains a family of chemicals known as furocoumarins, which causes painful skin blisters upon exposure to ultraviolet light. Some people are more sensitive to these chemicals, and the blisters can recur many months later after exposure to sunlight.



Peterr Wilson with Rosi at the Prince Edward Dog Park in Picton.

County. "There are huge stands of it in Delhi Park, which is disgraceful," she says. "I have warned several children who have been playing in close proximity when I run through there on my lunch hour." The plant is a biennial, producing foliage one year and going to seed in the following year. "Each plant produces thousands of seeds," says Weins. "Keeping it cut down and preventing it from going to seed is the best control. The seeds are wind-borne and that's why it has spread so rapidly. Digging can be done, but only if you are careful to wear protective clothing, including safety glasses." The plants should be placed in a black plastic bag and allowed to decay in strong sunlight. Weins says the plants should not be added to the compost heap, and definitively should not be burned. "It's best to avoid contact altogether, like poison ivy," she says. "If you are exposed, wash with soap and water as soon as possible. The effects are more intense when the affected skin is in sunlight."

Tanya Delaney, the County's Outdoor Facilities Supervisor, says the County does not have a formal procedure for dealing with this toxic plant. "When it gets reported to us, we have a contract with a licensed sprayer who will deal with it," she says. "They are approved by the Ministry of the Environment, and they use an environmentally friendly spray." Delaney says there is a plan to work with local organizations such as the Field Naturalists and the Master Gardeners to develop a comprehensive procedure to deal with this plant.

It is not only people who are susceptible to the



toxic effects of this plant, as Peterr Wilson recently found out. He had taken his dog Rosi to the Prince Edward Dog Park on a Friday morning and noticed she was sniffing around an area that had some wild parsnip plants. "On Saturday afternoon, I noticed a red welt on her nose, and I didn't think much of it," says Wilson. "On Sunday we went for a three-hour walk and now she's got a blister on her forehead, and by the time I got home another one had broken out." While he cannot be absolutely certain that wild parsnip is the culprit, Wilson believes the fact that the blisters increased when Rosi was out in the sunlight provides a very strong clue. There is no treatment for this, so Wilson has been keeping Rosi indoors to minimize her exposure to sunlight. Dog park volunteers have since removed the toxic plants. For an identification guide to wild parsnip, please visit [pecmastergardeners.com/wildparsnip/](http://pecmastergardeners.com/wildparsnip/).