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Alaska Herbs that Harm and Heal!



Cow Parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) Runners, hikers, berry-pickers, kids playing and backyard gardeners – Beware this striking green plant, up to 9 feet high, with its umbrella-like crowns of small white flowers. Early rains and June heat have produced a bumper crop this summer. Merely brushing against this plant picks up the chemical furanocoumarin from its outer hairs. Exposure to sunlight then starts a noxious photo reaction on the skin – either ‘acid scalding,’ or oxygen radical formation causing cellular membrane damage. Blisters form, then rupture and may ooze fluid for days. Even after healing the area may be discolored for years, and remain supersensitive to light and heat. Local runners and dermatologists have tried numerous preventive salves and antidotes with mixed or minimal results. The best strategy is simply to steer clear!

This herb is not all bad! The peeled stalks, like celery, can be eaten raw or cooked, or even stuffed with cream cheese or a seafood mixture as an intriguing hors d'oeuvre! Medicinal uses include relief of nausea and heartburn (as tea), aches and pains (liniment) and upset stomach (tincture). (Schofield, 1990)

Devil's Club (*Oplopanax horridum*) Alaska ginseng, grows in deeply shaded spaces, standing 3 to 10 feet tall with large maple-shaped leaves, a very spiny stem, and in late July, bunches of poisonous red berries. Soon the leaves will turn a brilliant gold and fall, leaving the signature club-like stalks. Unlike the parsnip, this plant is obviously dangerous to tangle with! But, like other members of the ginseng family, Devil's Club contains chemicals that strengthen and balance the body. These reside in the inner bark of the stem and the roots. Many native tribes have used this herb in tea, powder and salve to treat ailments ranging from fever to stomach ache, even diabetes and cancer.



Research is underway to see if scientific evidence backs up traditional uses and native folklore. Two middle school students from Juneau compared the efficacy of a Devil's Club salve to hydrocortisone cream for the treatment of psoriasis as a recent science fair project, and found it worked better. Dave Smith and his company, Alaska Green Gold in Fort Yukon, AK is researching Devil's Club and cow parsnip as treatments for tuberculosis. Smith believes Alaska could benefit from these plants as cash crops, exporting to Asian markets especially China where TB kills 150,000 people each year. Indeed Alaska may prove to be an important treasure trove of new medicinal herbs, just like the Amazon rain forest!

Resources

Mckinney, D. Good old Devil's Club. *Anchorage Daily News*. September 24, 2002: D1

Potempa, A. Curse of the trail. *Anchorage Daily News*, July 16, 2002: D1.

Schofield, J. *Discovering wild plants*. Alaska Northwest Books, 1990.

Toomey, S. Cow parsnip's painful secret. *Anchorage Daily News*, July 30, 1997: B1.

HerbMed: an interactive herbal database from the nonprofit Alternative Medicine Foundation. <http://www.herbmed.org/>

Native American Ethnobotany database. A database of almost 45,000 items concerning foods, drugs, dyes and fibers of Native American Peoples, derived from plants. Maintained by the University of Michigan - Dearborn. <http://herb.umd.umich.edu/>

Natural Standard: evidence-based information about complementary and alternative therapies. <http://www.naturalstandard.com> Call HSIS for Alaska userid and password.



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