

Plant dangers in the garden and countryside

We're a nation of gardeners and love walking in the countryside. But rural rambles can bring perils. While most plants that grow in the UK are harmless, some sting, scratch or are poisonous.

Keep your family safe by reading this guide to plant hazards, and find out what to do if someone is affected.

Stinging nettles



One of the most widespread plants in the UK, stinging nettles (pictured left) are the bane of many a country walk, especially for small children. Nettle leaves are covered in tiny, needle-like hairs. When you brush against a nettle, the hairs break off, penetrate your skin and sting you, producing the familiar burning sensation, itch and rash.

According to the Natural History Museum, the old wives' tale that the dock leaf (pictured right) is an effective natural remedy for nettle rash is true. The dock leaf, says the museum, contains chemicals that when rubbed over the sting, neutralise it and cool the skin down.

What to do: If you get stung by a nettle, look out for a dock leaf to rub on the rash. Dock leaves usually grow close to nettles. It's also a good idea to teach toddlers what stinging nettles look like so they can avoid them.

Giant hogweed



Giant hogweed can grow up to five metres tall, often along footpaths and riverbanks. If the sap of the plant comes into contact with your skin, it can cause severe, painful burns and make your skin sensitive to strong sunlight.

What to do: If you touch a giant hogweed, cover the affected area, and wash it with soap and water. The blisters heal very slowly and can develop into phytophotodermatitis, a type of skin rash which flares up in sunlight. If you feel unwell after contact with giant hogweed, speak to your doctor.

Thorny plants



Thorns, needles or spines from plants such as roses, holly, blackberry bushes, brambles can cause infections or other medical problems if they become implanted in your skin.

What to do: Remove thorns with tweezers – sometimes this is easier after soaking the area in warm water for a few minutes. Avoid injuries by teaching children how to check for plants with spiny leaves or thorns and always wear gardening gloves when you handle thorny plants.

Poisonous plants



Most British plants are harmless, but some – such as the yew, chrysanthemums, Hemlock Water Dropwort, deadly nightshade, snowdrops and mistletoe – are potentially toxic. Their leaves, berries, flowers, fruit, sap or bulbs can poison you, either by making you ill after eating them (as is the case with daffodil bulbs) or giving you a skin rash after touching them.

What to do: Remind children not to eat anything from the garden, unless you've said it's OK. If anyone shows symptoms such as tummy ache, vomiting, rashes or diarrhea after playing outside, take them to an A&E department immediately with a sample of what they've eaten. When picking and eating wild mushrooms and berries, such as blackberries and elderberries, be absolutely sure of their identity beforehand.

Poison ivy



Poison ivy (pictured left) causes a painful and itchy, blistery rash on your skin if you come into contact with it. The good news is you're unlikely to experience this nasty skin reaction because we don't have poison ivy in the UK. It only grows in North America.

English ivy (pictured right) – which is the type that you see climbing walls and in hanging baskets and window boxes – isn't harmful, although you should still

be careful when handling it if you have sensitive skin as its sap can be irritating.

Parsnip plant



Handling the parsnip plant (*Pastinaca sativa*), which grows wild and is cultivated in gardens in allotments may make your skin very sensitive to light leading to burning, blisters and a painful rash.

The problem seems to be the plant's sap which contains chemicals called furocoumarins. These chemicals are absorbed by the skin and can then react with sunlight to cause skin inflammation.

What to do: watch out for wild parsnip in roadside ditches and along railway tracks. If you develop skin irritation or blisters after touching parsnip plants, speak to your doctor.

The Royal Horticultural Society website has advice on how to keep your family safe from [potentially harmful garden plants](#). You can also call its helpline on 0845 260 8000, from 10am to 12.30pm and 1.30pm to 4pm.

SEE INFORMATION BELOW

Serious poisoning by plants is very uncommon in the UK. Some garden plants present a hazard, but the risk of severe poisoning, skin reaction or allergy is generally low.



Quick facts

If it is not a food plant, do not eat it.

Teach children not to play with or eat growing plants.

Use gloves when pruning or weeding and keep skin covered.

Do not leave prunings or uprooted plants in reach of farm animals or pets.

Check plant labels for toxicity warnings (sometimes stated on label).

What are the hazards?

Ingestion hazard

- Children are mostly at risk
- Some plants may cause digestive upset or discomfort if eaten
- A small number of common garden plants are more toxic and could cause severe poisoning (see plant list below)

Contact hazard

- Irritant sap may cause a burning sensation and sometimes blistering of the skin; anyone can be affected if exposure is sufficient
- Some plants contain chemicals called allergens. These do not affect everyone, but some individuals may acquire sensitivity to them, resulting in an allergic reaction
- A very small number of plants have sap which renders the skin excessively sensitive to strong sunlight. Contact with the plant followed by exposure to sunlight results in very severe, localised sunburn with blistering and long-lasting skin discoloration

What to do if there's a problem...

Human ingestion or skin contact

- If you think a child or adult has eaten part of a doubtful plant, seek medical advice immediately from a hospital Accident & Emergency department
- Take a sample of the plant with you
- Do not panic and DO NOT try to make the person sick