

The Devil in the Woods

By Susan Camp

There are a lot of plants in the woods that can hurt you. A holly leaf is a terrible thing to get stuck under your fingernail or in the side of your foot when you are wearing flip-flops— not that you should be wearing flip-flops in the woods. You can get tangled up in a patch of greenbrier or blackberry and swear you will never escape. Then there is the hazard of poison ivy and the sinking feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when you realize you are standing in the middle of a patch of “leaves of three.”

Nothing tops the pain of walking into the trunk of an *Aralia spinosa*, aptly known as Devil’s Walkingstick or Hercules’ Club. This small, deciduous shrub or tree is pure evil, its trunk peppered with dagger-sharp spines. Even the small leaf stems and midribs are covered with prickles when they mature. I admit that we used to cut some of them down until we learned that birds love to eat the berries that ripen in the fall.

Aralia spinosa is a member of the ginseng family and is native to the southeastern United States, ranging naturally from southern New York to Florida and west to Ohio, Illinois, and as far west as Texas in USDA Hardiness Zones 4 through 9. Devil’s Walkingstick prefers average soils of medium moisture, but will tolerate clayey and rocky soils. It can survive urban pollution and is unaffected by the chemical juglone produced by black walnut trees. It prefers full sun to part shade at forest edges or along streams and will develop into thickets that provide good cover for wildlife.

Devil’s Walkingstick appears in the spring as a slender, upright, gray-brown trunk covered with spines and leaf scars. It can reach a height of 15 to 40 feet, occasionally producing side branches. The unique, huge, doubly or triply compound leaves are composed of 2 to 3 inch long leaflets arranged in an umbrella-like, whorled pattern, giving the shrub a tropical appearance.

In July and August, panicles of creamy-white blossoms appear above the leaves. The flowers have a soft, lemony scent and are attractive to native bees and wasps. Juicy, black, berry-like drupes appear in early fall. The fruit is eaten by birds, including robins, bluebirds, and cardinals and small mammals, such as mice, raccoons, and foxes.

Devil’s Walkingstick is subject to aphids, mealybugs, and leafspot, but there are no serious pest or disease problems. It can be propagated from seed, root cuttings, or suckers. If you choose to plant Devil’s Walkingstick, be sure to locate it away from paths and walkways.

Devil’s Walkingstick, despite its nasty spines, is a great native plant, but it has an evil twin. The Asian *Aralia elata* or Japanese Angelica Tree, introduced as an ornamental in 1830, escaped into the wild and forms dense thickets that crowd out native plants. So similar in appearance to Devil’s Walkingstick that even experts have difficulty telling them apart, Japanese Angelica Tree

is listed as an invasive species in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina, and several Midwestern and western states. The National Park Service National Capital Region Exotic Plant Management Team “Invasive Plant Alert” offers comparisons of Devil’s Walkingstick and Japanese Angelica Tree. The New York Botanical Garden Publication “Mistaken Identity? Native Plants and their Look-Alikes” provides similar information. Although it is not currently listed as an invasive plant in Virginia, Japanese Angelica Tree, if conclusively identified, should be cut back to the ground and treated with an approved herbicide. Contact a Gloucester Master Gardener or Tree Steward at (804) 693-2602 for information on herbicide and pesticide use.

What do we have in our woods? I am certain it is that old nemesis, Devil’s Walkingstick. It hasn’t crowded out other plants and it offers a service to wildlife, so I will continue to respectfully give it a wide berth when I am walking through the woods.

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