

Respecting the Rue

The date was Wednesday, June 28, just days before the July long weekend. The weather was hot and sunny-and I do mean hot-shorts and T-shirts weather.

My youngest son, Steve-age 17, who was working for us this summer and I were weeding in the garden. The main focus of Steve's job was to keep the gardens relatively weed free, as well as an assortment of other jobs-particularly those tasks requiring brute strength. As this was his first time going through the garden I had decided to work along with him, to make sure he could discern the plants from the weeds and would know exactly what my definition of "weed free" was. I also hoped to encourage him to read the information signs to hopefully become more interested in these plants-OK so I was dreaming-his main interest seemed to be in the paycheck!

Steve has a unique and wonderful sense of humor which made the time seem to fly by and even John would come out to weed when he would hear the bursts of laughter coming from amongst the herbs. All was going quite well and we were moving along at a good pace-considering the frequent trips for water and then of course the washroom.

At about 2pm in the heat of a very hot and humid day we arrived at the Rue (*Ruta graveolens*) plot. In my desire to educate and inform everyone, about herbs, I proceeded to tell Steve about this herb and how it was used to keep cats out of the garden and how it was a common ingredient in the Italian Liqueur "Grappa"-I figured that would interest him! I also carefully pointed out the fact that Rue has been known to cause severe skin irritation when the fresh herb is handled in sunlight-adding of course that it has never bothered me though. Steve said he was not worried and wasn't allergic to anything, so we proceeded to aggressively weed the Rue plot, and then moved on to the next plot and so went the rest of our day. At 5:30, I handed Steve his wages and my car keys and off he went, saying he would work again on the following Tuesday as agreed-he had plans to go camping with friends for the long weekend.

Thursday, arrived just as hot and humid as the day before. Mid-morning I headed out into the garden to harvest some early blooming lavender and the vanilla grass-not more than 1 hour after this task-I noticed large red burning blisters start appearing on my arms and the back of my hands. On further investigation of my body parts they were also appearing in patches on my legs as well....my first thought was that I was having an allergic reaction to the Vanilla grass as this was the first time I had harvested this herb. Anyway, I grabbed the calendula ointment and began slathering it on every patch I could see. As the hours passed the patches started to blend together to form large red areas covering the entire underside of my arms and the pain...it was excruciating, like a very bad burn. John noticing my intense discomfort, headed to the garden looking for some herbal relief. He collected some fresh comfrey leaves and made a very strong infusion-which he then cooled. I applied this as compresses over my arms and legs using paper towels soaked in the infusion wrapped around the affected area and then covered with saran wrap-not likely to become a fashion trend in the near future. The cool liquid felt soothing and I retreated to the living room couch where with the help of a good stiff drink was able to sleep-it was the only relief from the pain I could find.

About 2 hours later the phone rang-yea, you guessed, it was Steve wondering why he was covered in these horrendous looking and extremely painful blisters-he had grabbed some Aloe Vera gel he found (maybe he was listening out in that garden). He had also decided that maybe going camping wasn't a very good idea and he suggested that in future if I wanted to curb his social life-I could just "ground him or something"-thank goodness for his sense of humor!

Steve and I conferred regularly over the next 72 hours to see whose rash was worse and what else each of us had tried-this included everything from Vit. E to a rash remedy made with English Ivy-all where helpful, but nothing was a miracle. The most comfort was achieved from the cold cloths applied to the areas. I even searched the internet but could not find anything that sounded hopeful-in fact there was almost no mention of the potential danger from handling the fresh Rue plants in direct sunlight.

I was not able to wear shorts (maybe that's a good thing) or short sleeves for the rest of the summer and just to make matters worse, I was presenting a Skin Care Workshop for Seneca College the following week, obviously not

setting a very good example. It is now the middle of October and the marks are fading but still visible. My son on the other hand, just made up wonderful inventive stories about surviving massive killer bee attacks and carried on as usual-however with his youth, his rash went away much quicker than mine did.

Needless to say-I have a lot more respect for my Rue plants and I will definitely be paying more attention to those precautionary facts associated with herbs in the future. One other thing - I am absolutely sure that Steve did learn something about herbs this summer!