

Telling Good Devils from Bad Angels

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In the unlikely case that you forgot, Araliaceae—the Ginseng family, is the 2025 MNPS featured taxa (see *Marilandica* Fall 2024, p. 10). In Maryland, there are 16 species, including 10 natives and 6 non-native invasives. Two species, one native and one invasive, are very similar looking and are described here.

***Aralia spinosa*, or Devil's Walking Stick (DWS)**, is a small native tree with spiny stems, large compound and spiny leaves, and a large terminal inflorescence. DWS occurs in all 23 Maryland counties and is a common component of the forest understory. It is an attractive woody plant that sustains native insects, pollinators, and wildlife (Image 1).

***Aralia elata*, or Japanese Angelica Tree (JAT)**, is native to China, Korea, Japan, and the Far Eastern Russian Federation and was introduced to the U.S. as an ornamental in 1830. JAT is reported to be invasive in 3 counties in Maryland: Baltimore, Frederick, and Montgomery (EDDMapS 2025). JAT competes with native plants and can alter plant communities. It is essential to learn how to identify it, to report it on apps like EDDMapS and iNaturalist, and to alert land managers so that it can be removed (Image 2).

Identification: The Devil is in the Details

Both DWS and JAT have spiny stems, large twice-pinnate compound leaves, similarly shaped leaflets with toothed margins, and can reach about 30 feet in height. However, the leaflet venation and inflorescences are distinctive, as described below.

LEAFLET VENATION

DWS: Main lateral veins curve away from the leaflet margin; smaller branching veins extend into marginal teeth (Image 3).

JAT: Main lateral veins and smaller branching veins continue into marginal teeth (Image 4).

**Tip: To see the veins better, flip a leaflet over and use a hand lens to examine closely.*

INFLORESCENCE

Both species have large showy terminal umbels of tiny white, 5-petaled flowers and they bloom July-August. The differences are:

DWS: Inflorescence is *stalked*, *taller than wide*, up to 4 ft. tall (Image 5).

JAT: Inflorescence is *stalkless*, *broadier than tall*, up to 2 ft. across, and often overtopped by foliage (Images 6, 7).



Image 1. DWS habit.



Image 2. JAT habit.



Image 3. DWS main lateral veins curve away from margin; smaller veins enter teeth.



Image 4. JAT main lateral and smaller veins continue into marginal teeth.



Image 5. DWS inflorescence is stalked.



Image 6. JAT inflorescence lacks a stalk.



Image 7. A dense patch of flowering Japanese Angelica Tree.

REFERENCES

Maryland Biodiversity Project, Devil's Walking Stick (*Aralia spinosa*).

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University of Georgia Center for Invasive Species and Ecosystem Health, Early Detection and Distribution Mapping Service: Japanese Angelica Tree (*Aralia elata*).