

Poison Hemlock



What Do We Know?

Poison hemlock, (*Conium maculatum*), is a highly invasive and poisonous plant in the Carrot Family (Apiaceae). It can be mistaken for other species such as wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) and wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*). Humans and livestock can be poisoned by eating small amounts of any part of the dried or green plants.

It was introduced from Europe in the 1800's and is widespread in Western US and is now being seen in Delaware. The species establishes in moist, disturbed, sunny areas such as ditches, roadsides, fence lines, and fields. It does not grow well in shady or frequently mowed areas.

The species is biennial, requiring two growing seasons to complete its life cycle. The first year's growth is strictly vegetative (photo 1), where a rosette develops with hairless finely-divided or lacy leaves. In spring of the plant's second year, it begins to grow stout, hollow and hairless stems. The stems can grow up to 10' in fertile soil -- much taller than wild carrots. The stems of poison hemlock are very different than the lookalike species, with green and distinctive mottled purple blotching (photo 2). The stems can have an unpleasant odor, and the compound leaves are arranged alternately along the branches. The long white taproot of poison hemlock can resemble wild carrot or wild parsnip.

In late spring, clusters of small white flowers at the end of stalks begin to bloom and persist into the summer (photo 4). Seed begins to mature soon after flowering (photo 3) and one plant can produce up to 40,000 seeds. After seed has set and is dispersing from the plant, the plant will then die.

It is advised to control this species by digging it up or treating with chemicals when it is entirely vegetative, before it flowers. If control is to be done when poison hemlock is in flower, remove and bag all flowers and seed heads, then remove or treat the entire plant. Cautiously cut seed heads to avoid dropping seeds. Seeds will still mature and remain viable even when the green foliage and stem are treated and appear dead. Mowed or cut plants will regrow. Plant material can remain poisonous for 3 years and seeds can be viable for up to 10 years. Burning plants can release toxins into the air, and toxins also persist in compost. Always wear gloves and protective clothing, including eye ware when handling this plant. Also be sure to thoroughly wash up and launder clothing.

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National Invasive Species Awareness Week - 2023

Quick Facts

- Poisonous
- Resemble wild carrot and wild parsnip
- Biennial plant
- Can grow to 10' tall
- Flowers will go to seed even if green plant is killed with herbicide
- One plant can produce up to 40,000 seeds
- Seeds remain viable in soil up to 10 years
- Second year stalks are smooth with mottled purple blotching
- Lacks hairs on leaves

