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POISON HEMLOCK

Most of the time, weeds simply bother gardeners by getting in the way of more desirable plants in lawns and shrub beds. We seldom think of weeds as being dangerous. But several in the Pacific Northwest have chemical components that can harm people and animals. One that thrives this time of year is Poison Hemlock.



“Conium maculatum L.” or Poison Hemlock is a biennial native to Europe that grows 6 to 8 feet tall with occasional plants growing to 10 feet tall. Stems are erect, stout and purple-spotted with distinct ridges and extensively branched. Leaves are shiny green, finely pinnately, divided three or four times and leaflets are segmented and 1/8 to 1/4 inch long. Lower leaves on long stalks clasp the stem; upper leaves on short stalks. Foliage has a strong musty odor. Flowers are borne in many umbrella-shaped clusters, each supported by a stalk. Flowers are white with sepals lacking. Paired seeds, 1/8 inch long, are light brown, ribbed and concave.

Environments Favorable to poison hemlock are usually degraded wetlands and prairies. They also appear in low-lying areas along small rivers, banks of drainage ditches, thickets, woodland borders, fence rows, springs, low-lying areas along railroads and roads. Also, they show up in pastures and abandoned fields, gradually invading perennial crops (i.e. alfalfa). Poison hemlock tolerates poorly drained soils and frequents stream and ditch banks. All plant parts are poisonous including the large white taproot. Humans have been poisoned by mistaking the plant for parsley.



Infestation: The habitats for the

Methods of Control: The best time to get rid of poison hemlock is when they start to come in the spring. Now you can pull them out but not with your bare hands as they are poisonous. Using washable gloves will work just fine if you want to pull them out. You can also mow them down during the spring. Pest management control measures include digging or repeated cutting after plant has developed stalks can prevent seed production. Use extreme caution and use gloves when handling Poison Hemlock and do not ever put poison hemlock in compost or incinerate.

If you would like more information about Poison Hemlock and/or the best way to dispose of it, call the La Center Public Works Department.