

POISON HEMLOCK

BY TERRY BONACE, ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION GROUP

Who knew that the poison that killed Socrates came from a plant that grows right here in Beverly Shores? Not poison sumac or poison ivy, each of which causes a mere skin rash. This one kills (if you eat it in sufficient quantity). Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) is originally from Europe and northern Africa (including, of course, Greece). It resembles a giant Queen Anne's lace (a wild carrot) but it lacks the hairs and graceful charm. The stems also bear purple spots. Poison hemlock grows 3 to 10 feet in moist soils. It is rangy and unattractive. Look for it in large numbers in ditches along highways. Poison hemlock is a biennial spending its first year with a rosette of fern-like leaves. Its second year finds it rapidly climbing upward and blooming from early June to late July.



Poison hemlock

The poisonous compounds in this hemlock (which are not related to the hemlock conifer, a charming and harmless tree) are too complex for this article and for the author. Suffice it to say that eating only 6 to eight leaves kill you. The poison is more highly concentrated in the seeds and roots. According to experts, people have been poisoned by mistaking the root for wild parsnip, the leaves for parsley, and the seeds for anise. All of these similar plants are in the same plant family. Children have been poisoned making whistles from the hollow stems of poison hemlock.

If you have poison hemlock growing nearby, you are not in any danger. Active consumption is required. (And to put things in perspective, many plants in the area can be poisonous. Caution should always be exercised if you are consuming wild plants.) But handling the hemlock plant without gloves or long sleeves and long pants could lead to a skin irritation. If you wish to remove it, don your protective clothes and dig it up with a shovel. Place the plant in a garbage bag and dispose of it. If you have too many plants to dig up, you might want to use a herbicide. Products containing 2,4-D with dicamba, 2,4-D with triclopyr or Roundup (glyphosate) can be used. Be sure to follow the pesticide label directions as required by state and federal law. It is best to spray the plants before they flower.



Hemlock stem

Poison hemlock presents a good opportunity to learn about similar plants in the same family, which includes parsley, carrot, celery, fennel, anise and parsnip. So many good plants for cooking in one family! There are also many decorative and harmless plants like great Angelica, cow parsnip, and Queen Anne's lace in this family. Nearly all of these plants have an umbrella like flower cluster so the family used to be called Umbelliferae in the days when I went to school (well after Socrates death, by the way).

The Environmental Restoration Group (ERG) will be glad to help you identify poison hemlock and other plants. Don't hesitate to contact Terry Bonace (tbonace@gmail.com), Candice Smith (candicepetersonsmith@gmail.com), or Bill Schaudt (blschaudt2@gmail.com) for assistance. Also please visit our website at www.bserg.org for further information on invasive plants and native replacements.