

# Poison Hemlock

*Conium maculatum*

Parsley Family

## Identification Tips

- Tall biennial, reaching 8 to 10 feet the second year
- Bright green, fernlike leaves with strong musty smell
- First year plants form low clumps of lacy leaves with reddish spots on stems
- Second year stems are stout, hollow, hairless, ribbed, with reddish or purple spotting/streaking
- Flowering plants covered with numerous small, umbrella-shaped clusters of tiny white flowers that have five petals
- Seeds form in green, ridged capsules that eventually turn brown

## Biology

Reproduces by seed. First year grows into a rosette; second year, develops tall stems and flowers. Rapid growth from March to May, flowers in late spring. Up to 40,000 seeds per plant are produced. Seeds fall near the plant and are moved by erosion, animals, rain and human activity. Seeds viable up to 6 years and germinate throughout the growing season; do not require a dormant period.

## Impacts

**Acutely toxic to people, livestock, wildlife; causes death by respiratory paralysis after ingestion.** Aggressive growth crowds out desirable vegetation. Early spring growth makes it more likely to be eaten by animals when there is limited forage available. Can be mistaken for a carrot when small.

## Distribution

Eurasian species, widely found in North America. Widespread in King County; found along roadsides, riparian areas, ravines, fields, ditches and un-managed yards and vacant lots. Prefers moist soil and sun, but can adapt to drier soil and shadier conditions.

## What You Can Do

Poison hemlock is so widespread in King County control is not required, but this plant should be removed whenever possible, especially in areas that are accessible to people, pets and livestock. **All parts of the plant are poisonous when eaten and even dead canes remain toxic for up to three years.** Always wear protective clothing (gloves, long sleeves) when handling this plant. **If you suspect poisoning, call for help immediately.** In both humans and animals, quick medical treatment can reverse the effects of hemlock poisoning.

**Non-regulated Class B  
Noxious Weed: Control  
Recommended**



*Poison-hemlock has bright green, fern-like leaves with a musty smell.*



*Thick, hairless stems have reddish-purple spots or streaks.*



*Clusters of small white flowers with five petals appear in late spring.*

## Questions?

King County Noxious Weed Control Program: **206-477-WEED** [kingcounty.gov/weeds](http://kingcounty.gov/weeds)



## Control Methods

### Manual:

**Wear gloves and long sleeves.** For small sites, pull or dig up plants. Remove entire root. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling plants. To be fully effective, all mature plants need to be removed so no new seeds are produced. Adding a layer of mulch to the area after it has been cleared, or replanting with desirable vegetation, will reduce germination of poison hemlock seeds present in the soil. Do not leave flower heads on the ground as the seeds can remain viable. Composting is not recommended; instead place in a plastic trash bag and toss into your regular trash.

### Mechanical:

**Caution: toxins can be inhaled when mowing poison hemlock.**

Mowing is not recommended due to risk of breathing in toxins. In addition, cut plants can regrow.

### Chemical:

**Follow labels exactly as written and only use products appropriate and legal for the site. Herbicides should only be applied at the rates specified on the label.** Spray foliage (leaves and stems) in the spring, followed by another application later in the summer for late sprouts. Spray plants before they flower for best results. Spraying may not prevent seed production in mature plants. Use of a selective broadleaf herbicide with the active ingredient triclopyr, 2,4-D or metsulfuron will work well for grassy areas. Glyphosate products work also but they kill grass as well as broadleaf plants. Do not cut down the treated plants until they have died. Seeds germinate throughout the season, so repeat treatment is necessary to eliminate all plants. Chemical control options may differ for private, commercial and government agency users. For more information, contact the Noxious Weed Control Program.



*Young plants look like carrots, but all parts (roots, stems, flowers, seeds, leaves) are poisonous. Wear protective clothing and handle with care.*



*Quickly invades open areas, displacing beneficial plants.*

## Could be confused with:

**Wild Carrot (*Daucus carota*) as well as other similar-looking members of the parsley family, including fennel, chervil and anise, resemble Poison Hemlock.**

Wild carrot can be distinguished from poison hemlock in a few ways: it typically only grows to about 3 feet; its plain green stems have fine hairs with fewer branches; and it flowers later in the summer. In contrast, poison hemlock grows to heights of 8 feet or more; its leaves give off a strong musty smell; and its hairless stems have reddish or purple blotches/spotting.



*Wild carrot (a.k.a. Queen Anne's Lace) is often confused with poison hemlock.*



*In early spring, look for mounds of bright green, lacy leaves. The largest clumps are second-year plants building up energy to flower and seed later in the spring.*