



Poison Hemlock



Photo by: Gary A. Monroe
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PLANTS Database

Plant Characteristics

Conium maculatum: This is a glabrous, branching biennial herb that can grow to 3 m (10 ft.) tall with a hollow, spotted stems arising, form a thick taproot. This tall erect biennial produces a vegetative rosette the first season of growth and an upright reproductive stem in the second season. Hemlock usually has only one fleshy taproot; there are partitions in a hollow area at the juncture of the root; stem and upper stem leaves are divided. The basal and stem leaves are finely dissected with a lace-like appearance, resembling the non-poisonous wild carrot. Flower heads at the top of the plant are large one to three inches in diameter, white and umbrella-shaped. Flowers develop into a green, deeply ridged fruit with several seeds. The plant has an unmistakable and disagreeable mouse like odor. This plant grows in much of Illinois in waste areas, especially partially shaded, poorly drained sites, stream banks or edges of cultivated fields. This plant stays green into late winter and greens up early in the spring.

Toxicity

The poison hemlock contains coniine, an alkaloid, and eight other compounds that are capable of poisoning livestock, poultry and humans. The stems, leaves and mature fruits are all toxic but the roots are the most toxic. The leaves are more dangerous in the springtime, and the fruit in the most dangerous in the fall. Livestock can be severely injured by eating this plant, usually by eating contaminated fresh hay or silage.

Symptoms

Signs of poisoning include dilated pupils, weakness, staggering gait, and respiratory paralysis two to three hours after ingestion. Other symptoms include gastrointestinal irritation, nervousness, trembling, staggering, coldness of extremities, slow heartbeat and eventually coma and death.

Treatment

Respiratory stimulants may be used advantageously. Intestinal protectives are suggested.

Information Sources

- Poisonous Plant of Southern United States
- <http://plants.usda.gov/>
- Bulletin 762 Horse Nutrition, Ohio State University.