Pretty and Poisonous

Have you noticed some tall plants along the roadside with white blooms? I live close to a creek and have a 3-mile walk around my “block” that allows me to take a closer look at what is coming up and starting to bloom. My neighbor’s daylilies are starting to bloom and the farmer’s corn is finally up about 2 inches. I have also noticed a large number of Poison Hemlock plants along the roadsides. OSUE Bulletin 866-98, ‘Identifying Noxious Weeds of Ohio’, states the following facts about Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*):

**Habitat:** wet sites, gardens, roadsides, wastelands  
**Life cycle:** biennial  
**First Year Growth Habit:** basal rosette of finely divide leaves with a pungent odor  
**Second-Year Growth Habit:** 2-7 feet tall, branched plant with flowers  
**Leaves:** alternate, pinnately compound, finely divided and toothed  
**Stems:** branched, waxy with purple blotches; hollow between nodes  
**Inflorescence:** June-August (second year). White flowers with five petals borne in large terminal compound umbels, 2-8 inches across.  
**Root:** fleshy taproot

Poison Hemlock shares floral characteristics with other members of the carrot family such as the native Queen Anne’s Lace (*Daucus carota*) and the non-native Wild Parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) which is notorious for producing sap that causes skin blisters. One of the quickest ways to identify Poison Hemlock for me is to check the stems for the obvious purplish blotches.

Poison Hemlock is highly poisonous to both humans and animals. All parts of this plant are highly toxic. According to a recent OSUE Buckeye Yard and Garden Line, the toxins must be ingested or enter through the eyes or nasal passages to induce poisoning; they do not cause skin rashes or blistering. Regardless, this plant should not be handled because sap on the skin can be rubbed into the eyes or accidently ingested while handling food. The roots are more toxic than the leaves and stems; however, all parts of the plant including the seeds should be considered dangerous.

It is a large and impressive plant which has been planted as an ornamental in some areas. It grows quickly in fertile soils. It is one of few green plants in pastures in late winter and is among the first plants to green up in the early spring.
While Poison Hemlock can be partially managed by mowing and tilling, the most effective control approach involves properly timed applications of selective or non-selective post-emergent herbicides including glyphosate. Always check with your chemical supplier before attempting chemical control of Poison Hemlock. Read and follow all directions on the chemical label.

Remember to email your gardening questions/problems to Brown County Master Gardener, Mike Hannah, at mhannah1951@gmail.com. Be sure to include your phone number as well as any photographs pertaining to your questions.

The accelerated growing season continues in my landscape. My daily walks reveal new blooms as well as new weeds! I finally replaced my crumbling whiskey barrel planter on the deck yesterday, just before it started to rain again. I moved the catnip to a different container. I wonder how long it will take for the tiger cat to find it!

Submitted by Faye Mahaffey
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