



# Whatcom Weeds

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## POISON HEMLOCK

### *Conium maculatum*

**THREAT:** Poison hemlock, a member of the parsnip or carrot family, was introduced as an ornamental plant into the U.S. from Europe. The plant has become an invasive weed throughout most of North America and Australia, and parts of South America and New Zealand. It is adapted to a wide range of climates and can be found in disturbed sites, pastures, along roadsides and waterways. Poison hemlock spreads solely by seed, which can be moved by vehicles, people, animals, agricultural products and water. All parts of this plant are poisonous, causing fatalities in livestock and humans. It is believed this was the plant which was given to Socrates to drink, causing his death. Poisoning occurs in humans most often as a result of mistaken identity. The seeds are sometimes collected, being mistaken for anise. Poison hemlock is also sometimes mistaken for wild parsnip, wild carrot or parsley. Children are sometimes poisoned, by using the stems for peashooters or whistles. Poison hemlock can be distinguished from similar plants by its smooth, blotchy purple, and absolutely hairless stem. Plants in the carrot family should not be collected for food use unless the collector is absolutely sure of the identification, as there are other poisonous members of this family that can also be mistaken for edible plants. Children should be taught to avoid these plants.



**DESCRIPTION:** Poison hemlock is an erect biennial, growing up to 8 feet high, commonly 4-6 feet high. It has a long, white, fleshy taproot that is sometimes branched. The stems are branched, smooth, hairless, and hollow with purple spots and blotches near the base. It has fern-like leaves, very similar to carrot leaves. The flowers are numerous, white, and grow in umbrella shaped clusters. After producing seed, the plant usually dies.



**MANAGEMENT OPTIONS:** Poison hemlock can be controlled using mechanical, chemical and biological controls. Repeat cultivation can be used to control seedlings. Hand pulling is effective and should be done before the plant is in flower. Mowing can delay flowering but the plant often flowers at a shorter height, so mowing must be continued throughout the season. A species of moth, *Agonopterix alstromeriana*, feeds on poison hemlock and has been unintentionally introduced into the U.S. from Europe. It is now established in both the Pacific Northwest and New England. The larvae of this species are capable of complete defoliation of poison hemlock plants. Although effective on a site-by-site basis, these insects are unpredictable in occurrence and do not seem to be effective on a regional scale. The herbicide glyphosate (many trade names) can be used as a foliar spray to actively growing hemlock plants before the bolting stage. Use a product with at least 40% active ingredient glyphosate and mix at a 1-2% rate.

Contact the Weed Control Board for more site-specific recommendations.