

## Poison hemlock thriving

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Even though spring has not yet arrived, the mild winter in much of Nebraska has provided an early start for some weeds. On southern exposures and sheltered ditch bank areas poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) is already starting to grow. Poison hemlock is a plant of importance since it can be poisonous to livestock. Livestock may be attracted to it this time of year, even though the plant is not considered very palatable, because it may be one of the few green, growing plants in the landscape. Efforts should be made to keep livestock from having grazing access to the plant.

The poisonous alkaloids are present in all plant parts, however leaves, flowers and seeds tend to have the highest concentrations. Cattle are more sensitive to the effects of poison hemlock alkaloids relative to other livestock. Consuming just five pounds of foliage can be potentially lethal for cows<sup>1</sup>.

A number of poison hemlock plant samples have been submitted to the UNL Diagnostic Clinic for identification in the last four years. This species seemed to have flourished in both rural and urban landscapes in recent years. Poison hemlock is in the parsley family and has potential human health risks. The lacy appearance of hemlock leaves can be confused with edible parsleys when plants are young. The ingestion of small amounts of poison hemlock can make humans sick as well.

### Description

Poison hemlock is a taprooted biennial broadleaf plant. A distinguishing identification characteristic is the purple to red spots or irregular blotches on the hollow stems. The

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leaves are finely divided, hairless and may have a glossy green color. Leaves are alternate on the stem, but this may be difficult to determine in its first year of growth, since it may have a very basal rosette appearance until it produces a stalk in its second year of growth. Flowers are small, white and arranged in relatively large compound umbels. When mature, plants can reach 10 feet in height. It is often described as thriving in moist soils and is commonly found in pastures, ditchbanks and roadsides.

## Control

A mixture of 2,4-D + dicamba or Grazon P&D can effectively control poison hemlock when applied in the fall or early spring<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult to recommend treatment in early March due to potential variability in the weather, however spot treatments may be effective if three to four warm, sunny days, with nighttime temperatures above freezing, follow application. Keep livestock out of treated areas, as the poisonous alkaloids can still be present in dead leaf tissue. Dead plant tissue also tends to be more palatable to livestock than green or growing plants. Repeated herbicide applications may be necessary over a number of years in heavily infested areas for adequate control. Poison hemlock can also be controlled with repeated mowing.



## References

- <sup>1</sup> Vetter, J. 2004. Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum* L.). Food and Chemical Toxicology. 42: 1373-1382.
- <sup>2</sup> 2012 Guide for Weed Management in Nebraska (EC130). p. 148.

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