



Whatcom Weeds

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WESTERN WATER-HEMLOCK

Circuta douglasii

THREAT: Western water-hemlock, a member of the carrot family, is a plant native to the Pacific Northwest. Since it is native and is not invasive, this plant is not considered a weed by the Weed Control Board. However, due to its extreme toxicity, it is a plant we would like to make more familiar to people. Western water-hemlock is considered one of the most poisonous plants in the temperate zone, violently poisonous to both humans and animals. All parts of the plant are poisonous; with the roots being most poisonous (a piece of root the size of a walnut can kill a cow). Human deaths have occurred from people mistaking water-hemlock for edible members of the carrot family and from children putting the hollow stems in their mouths. The carrot family also includes the introduced, poisonous plant called poison hemlock. Wild plants should only be eaten if the identification is positively known; children should be taught not to eat unknown plants, even if they look similar to familiar plants, such as carrots. Livestock generally avoid this plant but may eat it early in the spring, as water-hemlock appears before many other plants begin to grow. Symptoms of water-hemlock poisoning include excessive salivation, loss of muscular control and convulsions. Death can occur in as short as 15 minutes, although 3 to 4 hours is more common.



DESCRIPTION: Western water-hemlock is a perennial member of the carrot family. It grows only in wet places, such as along streams, ponds and irrigation ditches, or in marshy areas. Water-hemlock grows from 2 to 8 feet tall and has hollow, smooth, pale green stems. The leaves consist of several lance-shaped to oblong, sharply pointed, toothed leaflets. The arrangement of the leaflet veins distinguishes this plant from other similar species. With western water-hemlock, the veins run from the midrib to the notches along the leaf edges, then from the notches to the tip (rather than running directly to the tips of the teeth, as in other species). The root system consists of a root crown, immediately below the surface, with many finger-like roots that may grow up to 10 inches long. The roots are hollow, and when cut lengthwise, reveal a series of chambers, which is another distinguishing characteristic of this plant. The cut root exudes a yellow to orange, oily, sweet-smelling liquid (If you cut open water-hemlock roots, do not use the knife for food purposes later, as any plant residue on the knife could cause poisoning). The small, white flowers are born in an umbel, like other members of the carrot family.

MANAGEMENT OPTIONS: Since western water-hemlock is a native plant, it is a natural, though uncommon, part of the local ecosystem. Control may be desired in areas where children or livestock may come into contact with this plant. Water-hemlock may be controlled through mechanical and chemical means. Plants can be dug or pulled and should be burned or disposed where nothing will eat them (gloves should be worn when handling the plant). Contact the Weed Control Board for chemical recommendations.



Roots show distinctive chambers in cross section