Poison Hemlock vs. Wild Carrot (Queen Anne's Lace)

Wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), also known as Queen Anne's Lace, is often mistakenly identified as poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), and it is more likely what is growing in your backyard. Both are weeds, but the control method may be different once correctly identified.

Poison hemlock is in the same family (*Apiaceae*) as carrots, celery, parsnips, and several herbs, including parsley, cilantro, chervil, fennel, anise, dill, and caraway.

Poison Hemlock vs. Wild Carrot

Poison Hemlock Stem | Wild Carrot Stem

Figure 1

Poison Hemlock Foliage | Wild Carrot Foliage

Figure 2

Poison Hemlock Flower | Wild Carrot Flower

Figure 3

Poison Hemlock vs. Wild Carrot

Stems (figure 1): The most distinct visible difference between poison hemlock and wild carrot is the stems. The poison hemlock's stem has purple blotches, is "hairless," and is hollow. Wild carrot's stem is green (young plants), burgundy-green (mature plants), and "hairy."

Foliage (figure 2): Although both species have fern-like leaves, there are some differences in the leaves. The leaves of poison hemlock are sharper in detail, up to 2 feet long, and glossy dark green without "hairs." Wild carrot leaves are lacy or feathery, shorter (2-6 inches long), and nearly hairless to bristly-haired.

Flowers (figure 3): The flowers of poison hemlock and wild carrot are more similar. Both have white flowers clustered at the end of the stem that are flat, umbrella-like.

Scent: When crushed, the leaves and stems of poison hemlock have an unpleasant odor, whereas the leaves and stems of wild carrot smell like carrots when crushed.

Habitat: Poison hemlock and wild carrot are considered invasive plants found in fields, pastures, vegetable crops, orchards, roadsides, and other disturbed places. Wild carrot is typically found in sandy or gravelly soils, and poison hemlock prefers moist soils.

Impact: Of course, there's a significant difference in the effect of poison hemlock vs. wild carrot. Poison hemlock is toxic to livestock and humans through ingestion. Cases of human poisoning are relatively rare. The toxin affects the nervous system and can result in fairly rapid death in livestock that feeds on poison hemlock in fresh foliage, stored silage, or contaminated hay. The sap of poison hemlock can also cause contact dermatitis.

Management & Control

The management of both poison hemlock and wild carrot are similar.

- Inspect areas frequently for new infestations. Young plants of both species start as rosettes of foliage.
- Mechanical removal is preferred using a spade or trowel. Wear gloves and long sleeves to avoid skin exposure to the sap of poison hemlock. Be sure to remove the entire taproot to prevent regrowth. Discard the plant in the trash, do not compost or burn it.
- Mowing frequently before flowering begins or plowing or cultivating the area will disrupt the seed germination cycle. Bag and discard the clippings to avoid inadvertently dispersing seeds.
- Use herbicides only as a spot treatment on seedlings or small rosettes. Mechanically remove mature plants. Large infestations may be treated with herbicides containing active ingredients 2,4-D, triclopyr, or glyphosate. Fully follow label instructions about protective clothing and treat carefully to avoid overspray. You can use an empty six oz. can (from tomato paste, for example) with both ends removed to guard against overspray.

Learn more about poison hemlock and wild carrot from the links below.

Sources & Resources

"Poison Hemlock," University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources
http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn74162.html

"Wild Carrot," University of California Agriculture & Natural Resources
http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/WEEDS/wild_carrot.html

"The 'Don't Touch Me' Plants," Purdue University Extension
https://ag.purdue.edu/btny/purdueweedscience/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Dont-Touch-Me-Plants.pdf