

POISON HEMLOCK AND COW PARSLEY

(Conium maculatum and Anthriscus sylvestris)

Submitted by Michelle Pooler, Jeffco Open Space Volunteer Estate Gardener, Boettcher Mansion

Some invasives are nearly identical in appearance but very different in use. Poison hemlock, which has lately been spotted at a dog park in Lakewood and adjacent to a shopping center in Golden, contains a nerve toxin that can result in death by respiratory paralysis (there is no antidote). Cow parsley is an edible, with a flavor described as “a grassy parsley with undertones of licorice.” Both are biennial invasives and both are members of the carrot family, with long tap roots. Cow parsley also spreads via rhizomes. Poison hemlock and cow parsley are both native to Europe and the Mediterranean area.

WARNING: Poison hemlock is DANGEROUS: If you are not absolutely sure which plant you are sampling, steer clear!

Both plants are incredibly lovely, but because of hemlock’s high toxicity, it should be avoided. Both plants grow in disturbed areas, near streams and ditches, and along roadsides and the edges of cultivated fields. In a heavily infested space, it would not be uncommon to find these growing side-by-side. Hemlock can reach 8 feet in height, while cow parsley generally tops out at 5 feet.

How do you tell them apart? Start with stems. Hemlock has smooth, hollow stems that are vivid green with purple spotting. Cow parsley has hollow stems that are longitudinally striped and green with flushes of purple. It has tiny hairs on the stem and leaf stalks that are best detected by touch. The biggest difference between these two might be the heavy, unpleasant odor of a broken stem of hemlock. When working with hemlock, it’s advisable to wear heavy gloves, as the sap can cause an unpleasant skin rash. Don’t compost the stems, which remain toxic even three years after the plant has died. Cow parsley smells like grassy parsley. Its sap is not corrosive, so it can be composted. ■



Poison hemlock



Cow parsley



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