

The Case of the Poison Pesto

By Dr. Arthur O. Tucker

Garden Tales

the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium was asked to identify some "wild parsley" that a woman sent from New Castle County. She wanted to make pesto for her family from this plant. I usually submit a written identification to the homeowner, but in this case I phoned immediately. The plant was spotted water-hemlock, *Cicuta maculata*, and extremely poisonous! As the name suggests, this weedy species has purple spots on the stems and is similar in appearance and toxicity to the European poison-hemlock, *Conium maculatum*. The latter was the horrible poison that Athens forced Socrates to take for "corrupting" its youth. The other related species of water-hemlock, *Cicuta virosa*, is also poisonous. These members of the carrot family (Apiaceae) are all very similar in appearance to flat-leaved Italian parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*).

In all my years of herb gardening, though, I've seldom seen parsley reseed itself, and it certainly never grows much beyond 12-18 inches. The poison- and water-hemlocks, meanwhile, can reach 6 feet. True parsley seed is very difficult to germinate. In fact, an old wives' tale says that it has to go to Hell nine times and back before it will come up. Actually, there is a leaching of germination inhibitors over time, and these can be easily removed in true parsley seed by soaking it in water overnight with three changes of water.

We thought the New Castle County incident was a quirk, but a year later, a man from Kent County sent in another specimen of "wild parsley" that he was going to serve on roast beef that evening. Again, it turned out to be spotted water-hemlock, and again we grabbed the phone! Then, just this June, a commercial grower of parsley in California noticed some weird plants in his fields of flat-leaved Italian parsley that he could not identify. The seed had come from Italy and, again, these strange parsley plants turned out to be water-hemlock. We alerted him immediately!

Be forewarned: if you find "wild parsley," it most probably is not that, but instead a poisonous plant!

The poison hemlocks should not be confused with Canadian hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*), the state tree of Pennsylvania. While not really poisonous per se, Canadian hemlock is not very tasty



Submitted photo

Though it might be mistaken for wild parsley, spotted water-hemlock (*Cicuta maculata*) is extremely poisonous! As the name suggests, this weedy species has purple spots on the stems and is similar in appearance and toxicity to the European poison-hemlock (*Conium maculatum*).

for tea. Not only does Canadian hemlock cast a dense shade, but this tree has the ability to take up all the calcium in the nearby soil, rendering it barren. Unfortunately, probably because of climate change, Delaware's Canadian hemlocks are coming down with severe infestations of hemlock woolly adelgids (*Adelges tsugae*), which look like white cottony masses on the leafy stems. This scourge can kill a Canadian hemlock in 3-5 years! Insecticides are not really a cure because the trees become continually infected; it's a losing war!

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education and outreach about plant identification, location, and use. Call Dr. Susan Yost at 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the herbarium. Call Dr. Arthur Tucker at 857-6408 for more information about this article.