

Hemlock, be aware and beware



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

Over the years, I have studied many aspects of the great outdoors, including both flora and fauna, with a special interest in game fish and animals. I have studied edible plants, but never with any amount of zeal, possibly because I never really liked vegetables, and in the woods, it is the last food source I would ever seek.

One important survival tool is the ability to identify edible plants and gather enough to satisfy the hunger pains in your stomach. I would like to point out, that the term “edible” does not necessarily mean good to eat. Edible simply means that if you ingest a certain amount of the “edible” plant, you won’t wind up face down in your mashed potatoes.

If an “edible” plant was truly delicious, it would be wrapped in cellophane and sold for five bucks a pound at the grocery store. I would add that a number of edible plants as very tasty, but many others are strong and bitter, requiring some boiling or

two pounds of sugar, to make palatable.

One of the downfalls of collecting edible plants is the possibility of collecting one not so edible, by mistake. There are plenty of plants out there that can quickly relieve you of those pesky life insurance premiums, so knowing exactly what you are looking for is extremely important.

Most of us know the basic poisonous plants, poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac. While these are generally not deadly, they can cause symptoms that can reach from unpleasant, all the way to unbearable. Sometimes there are poisonous plants that look very much like edible ones, and ingesting the wrong one could be the final mistake.

Poison hemlock, or *Conium maculatum*, is one of them. This plant is making a grand showing in Colorado in recent years. It is a biennial weed that found its way here from Europe. I’m fairly certain the plant got here by mistake, as I couldn’t see anyone intentionally smuggling in some hemlock starter for their yard, but the story is folks thought it would make a nice garden plant.

Hemlock grows four to eight feet tall and has smooth stems that are rigid and have purple spots. The leaves are shiny green



Poison hemlock, or *Conium maculatum*, is making a grand showing in Colorado in recent years. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

with a multi-stemmed, fern like appearance. They are kind of lacy looking, similar to parsley, and have a musty odor when crushed.

During the first year, a hemlock plant will form a large rosette. A two-year-old plant will sport large stem, flowers, and then die. The flowers have 5 petals, clawed and notched, and are white umbrella-like clusters, only about 1.5mm long. It produces some fruit by September and is flat, small, and a greenish color.

Hemlock grows along streams, rivers, roadside ditches, and irrigation canals. Along the canals around my house, it has been popping up in great

er numbers over the last couple of years. Poison hemlock is also found in crop and pasture lands, creating a major problem for livestock.

This delightful plant contains a plethora of poisonous alkaloids, the primary one being coniine. This collection of alkaloids interferes with the nervous system, causing paralysis, respiratory failure, and ultimately death. Just a small amount can kill an average sized cocktail party.

All parts of the plant are poisonous. Animals generally do not eat the plant because the plant has a sap that deters it from the menu, unless food is scarce, such as during droughts. Ingestion of .25% of an animal’s body weight is lethal.

Certain people can be a concern for people who have a sensitivity to hemlock. A skin rash, similar to poison ivy can develop after touching the plant. The toxins can enter the body through cuts or mucous membranes. In rare instances, if the plant’s toxins enter your bloodstream through a cut, or through your eyes or nose, you could experience hemlock poisoning.

In short, while casual contact with poison hemlock is unlikely to cause severe illness, it’s best to avoid touching it whenever possible and to be especially careful when handling the plant and definitely don’t eat it.

I mention the “don’t eat it casually but should point out that it could be mistaken for something edible. When very young, it looks just like parsley growing, and later, it looks a lot like members of the carrot family, and some people have eaten it

by mistakenly thinking it was wild carrots.

The fact this plant is appearing on the Western Slope is troubling, especially for our ranchers. Studies indicate that poisonous plants like poison hemlock and water hemlock are a significant cause of economic loss for the livestock industry, affecting three to five percent of cattle and horses each year.

The claim of fame for hemlock probably goes all the way back to 399BC when Socrates was sentenced to death by the Athenian jury after being found guilty of impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. According to Plato’s *Phaedo*, as Socrates faced the death penalty, he discussed the possibility of immortality before drinking the poison. Purportedly, he drank a glass of hemlock tea, and soon thereafter, crossed the last horizon.

Symptoms of hemlock poisoning can occur immediately after ingesting the plant, including sweating, vomiting, dilated pupils, dry mouth, excess salivation, rapid heartbeat, confusion, muscle weakness, tremors, and seizures. In the more severe cases, there can be delayed symptoms such as slow heartbeat, low blood pressure, muscle paralysis, muscle death, kidney failure, and central nervous system depression.

For folks with dogs, pets, and livestock, symptoms appear within an hour after the plant is ingested, and the animal can die from respiratory paralysis within two to three hours. Animal symptoms include trembling, salivation and frothing, lack of coordi-

nation, rapid pulse and convulsions. In other words, animal or human, seek medical attention immediately.

The Colorado Department of Agriculture lists poison hemlock as a “List C” species on the Colorado Noxious Weed Act. Depending on the jurisdiction, the plant needs to be eradicated, contained, or suppressed.

With the droughts, we are probably going to see more poison hemlock along our canals, fence lines, and road ditches, and need to be aware of the consequences of having it around. While human deaths are rare, our animals are not so lucky.

For me, whenever I head to the woods, I will put some provisions in my pack. A couple MREs, a handful of Clif Bars, things that are lightweight and nonperishable, are much better than trying to find wild vegetables. One power bar will go much farther than copious amounts of boiled skunk cabbage in my book.

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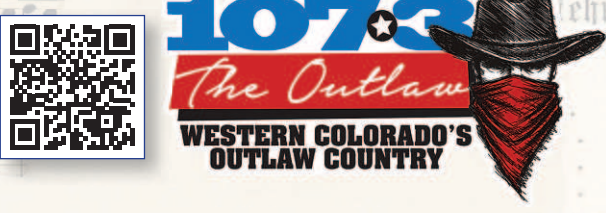
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USDA

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11th consecutive crop year. Acreage reaching that threshold would become permanently ineligible for payments under the covered programs.

Additionally, the legislation would direct the USDA to recognize drought conditions occurring at the source of an irrigation supply when determining whether a lack of water qualifies for prevented planting assistance. It would also require the Commodity Credit Corporation to consult with Farm Service Agency county committees and state technical committees when making certain

natural disaster determinations.

“In western Colorado, water determines what our farmers can grow and, in difficult years, whether they can plant at all. When drought and low water supplies make planting impossible, our producers shouldn’t be penalized simply because they made a responsible decision based on the water they knew would be available,” Hurd said. “This legislation provides farmers with greater certainty while maintaining common-sense safeguards to ensure assistance goes to producers who need it. Agriculture is fundamental to our rural communities, and I’ll continue working to

make sure federal programs reflect the realities our farmers and ranchers face on the ground.”

“For years, Colorado farmers have been dealing with low snowpack and other conditions that leave them without enough irrigation water to plant, only to find that the farm safety net doesn’t always recognize those losses,” Bennet added. “I wrote this bill with farmers and agricultural leaders in Colorado to help make sure our agriculture policies better reflect the realities farmers face in the west. I’m glad our House colleagues are joining us in this effort and introducing companion legislation.”