



Water Hemlock flowers



## WATER HEMLOCK

Although it is related to parsley, Water Hemlock (*Cicuta douglasii*) is one of the most poisonous plants in our region. It thrives in wet places such as riparian zones and poorly drained areas throughout BC, and should be watched for in wet pastures. It is a large, robust plant that grows up to about two meters and has hollow, jointed stems. The leaves are shaped like a long oval and are coarsely saw-toothed. The flowers are small and white, borne in clusters. A distinguishing feature is an enlarged or bulbous taproot, which has hollow chambers containing an extremely dangerous toxin called cicutoxin. Another similar plant, Cow Parsnip, does not have saw-toothed leaves, is a larger plant and does not have a bulbous root.

As is the case with many noxious plants, generally stock animals will only graze Water Hemlock if other plant material is sparse. Thus animals are in the most danger in wet pastures that have been over-grazed. Poisonings have been reported in early spring on the

young shoots when there is little other pasture growth, or in the fall when the poison-containing roots are easily pulled from the ground. Cases have occurred with horses, cattle, sheep, goats and bison, however because of their pulling action cattle are the most susceptible. When poisoned, animals can succumb very quickly; within 15 minutes or so. If found alive, symptoms such as convulsions, frothing, and clamping of jaws may be evident. A veterinarian should be contacted of course, however apparently no specific antidote exists.

Chemical control is available, but since there is normally a sparse population when Water Hemlock is present, it makes more sense to manually pull the plants. Dispose by composting. Do not leave dead plants lying where they were pulled, especially if they are past flowering. Make sure to wear gloves, long sleeves and eye protection when handling the plants.



## References:

Western Producer, July 31, 2008. Article by Roy Lewis, DVM.  
<http://www.agf.gov.bc.ca/cropprot/weedguid/waterhmlk.htm>