

Alert: Poison Hemlock Now Abundant in Our Midst



By Dr. Joe Morris, Sierra Club Outings Leader

After last winter's epic rains, the "superbloom" hit the media, and large fields of California Poppies became visible even from satellite photos. But the deluge didn't pick floral favorites. Poison oak now abundantly covers the sides of many trails in SLO County, but of even greater concern is poison hemlock. In previous years, hiking the local trails, I rarely saw it. This year, it is jumping up in new places everywhere, in large clusters, along roads and at trailside.

Poison hemlock is the same species that killed Socrates. In the 1800s, it was exported to the U.S. as an ornamental garden plant and has now spread across the country. It's an attractive plant. Clusters of small, white flowers atop green stalks and lacy leaves can rise shoulder high or more. A key identifier is the common purple spots along the side of the stems. Bunches of poison hemlock generally grow together, so they are clearly visible from yards away. After August, the flowers will turn into brown seed pods, the most poisonous part of the plant.

I first discovered the plants a month ago, driving Los Osos Valley Road south from SLO. Vast amounts shot up on both sides of the road. Later I noticed it on the sides of trails, like Harmony Headlands, so close that one can accidentally brush against it, and more recently on patches of the median strip on Highway 1 between SLO and Morro Bay. Now I see it almost daily in many other places where there is at least a stalk or two.

Please don't touch it. Doing just that can cause a severe rash. Ingestion of even 100 grams will probably get you a quick trip to urgent care and can kill dogs within hours. Study the photo, learn to recognize it, and tell your hiking friends. Avoid taking it out, even with gloves, but contact your city for safe disposal. It's a perennial, so it will be around us next year and afterwards.

[Raven's Roots Naturalist School](#) offers some tips that could save your life if you encounter the plant:

- Poison hemlock stems are hairless with dark purple spots, while Queen Anne's lace has hairy stems and no purple.
 - Queen Anne's lace has three-pronged bracts at the base of the flowers, while poison hemlock does not.
 - The flowers on both plants are white and bloom in an umbrella-shaped pattern, but Queen Anne's lace flowers are flat on top and usually have a single purplish/red flower at the center. Poison hemlock flowers are more rounded, with no colorful flower.
 - While both have leaves that are fern-like, Queen Anne's lace's leaves will have hairs on the undersides. The leaves of poison hemlock are not hairy.
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