

Cicuta maculata

[Synonyms : *Cicuta occidentalis*]

BEAVER POISON is a biennial. Native to eastern North America it has tiny, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as American cowbane, American cowbean, American hemlock, American poison-hemlock, American water hemlock, Children's bane, Cowbane, Death of man, False parsley, Fever root, Mock eelroot, Muskrat weed, Musquash poison, Musquash root, Poison hemlock, Poison parsnip, Scoots, Snakeroot, Snakeweed, Spotted cowbane, Spotted hemlock, Spotted parsley, Spotted water hemlock, Water hemlock, Wild carrot, Wild hemlock, and Wild parsnip.

Warning – an extremely poisonous plant (especially the root) that acts rapidly on the central nervous system (usually within 30 minutes). It can cause salivation followed by violent convulsions, delirium, dilated pupils, vomiting, abdominal pain, paralysis and death. It is poisonous for animals.

The poisonous roots of beaver poison can be confused with those of the non-poisonous American sweet cicely (*Osmorhiza longistylis*), horseradish (*Armoracia rusticana*), turnip (*Brassica rapa*), garden radish (*Raphanus sativus*) and parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), and also the poisonous roots of monk's-hood (*Aconitum napellus*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) and of white bryony (*Bryonia dioica*).

Maculata is derived from Latin *macula* (spot, stain) meaning 'spotted or blotched'.

The plant's poisonous nature was familiar to North American Indian tribes and authorities note particular awareness of this on the part of the Dakota and Iroquois (and that members of the latter had used it to commit suicide). In the past the Klamath tribe used beaver poison as an ingredient in their arrow poison, and some of the Chippewa Indians lured buck deer within arrow range by smoking a mixture containing the root. It also played a central 'russian roulette' type of role in some Cherokee ceremonial ritual – and, provided that you experienced no dizziness after chewing the root, you would have a long life, otherwise death would be imminent.

In veterinary medicine the Iroquois applied root poultices to their horses to cure lameness or heal sores.

One or two tribes also found medicinal uses for beaver poison. Records note that Cherokee women once ate the roots as a drastic contraceptive. Some of the Cree Indians used a root liniment to ease rheumatism and the Iroquois applied a plant decoction to broken bones, bruises and sprains (not least for disinfectant qualities).

Medicinally, the plant was once used to treat various forms of headache but, because of its virulence, it is not used today.