

Conium maculatum

[Synonyms : *Cicuta major*, *Cicuta officinalis*, *Cicutaria vulgaris*, *Conium cicuta*, *Conium maculosum*, *Conium major*, *Conium vulgaris*, *Coriandrum cicuta*, *Coriandrum maculatum*, *Selinum conium*, *Sium conium*]

HEMLOCK is an annual or biennial. Native to Europe and Asia, it has tiny, white flowers.

It is also known as Bad man's oatmeal, Beaver poison, *Bénarde* (Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Bolehlay plamatý* (Czech), *Bolehlay škvrnitý* (Slovak), Break-your-mother's-heart, Bunk, Caise, California fern, Cartwheel, Cashes, *Cegiden* (Welsh), *Chue* (Channel Islander-Guernsey), *Cicuta*, *Ciguë* (French), Common hemlock, Cowbane, Deadly hemlock, Devil's blossom, Devil's flower, Fool's parsley, *Gefleckter Schierling* (German), Gipsy curtains, Gipsy flower, Hare's parsley, Heck-how, Herba benedicta, Herb Bennet, Herb bonnet, Hever, Honiton lace, Humlock, Humly, Kakezie, Kecksies, Kelk, Kesh, Kewse, Kex, Kill cow, Koushe, Koushle, Lace flower, Lady's lace, Lady's needlework, Mother die, Muskrat weed, Musquash root, Nebraska fern, Nosebleed, Noxious weed, *Odört* (Swedish), Pickpocket, Poison hemlock, Poison parsley, Poison root, Poison snakeweed, St. Benedict's herb, St. Bennet's herb, Scabby hands, *Shookran* (Urdu), *Skarntyde* (Danish), Snakeweed, Spotted corobane, Spotted cowbane, Spotted hemlock, Spotted parsley, Stink flower, Stinkweed, Water hemlock, Water parsley, Wild hemlock, Winter fern, Wodewhistle, and Woomlicks; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of 'death by poisoning', and 'you will cause my death'.

The plant contains a colourless liquid that darkens upon exposure to air, smells of mice (particularly when bruised) and has an unpleasant and fetid, bitter taste.

Warning – all parts, but particularly young leaves and unripe fruit, are extremely poisonous and affect the central nervous system. Taken internally it can cause dilated pupils, loss of speech, vomiting, diarrhoea, drowsiness, inco-ordination, coldness of the extremities, breathing difficulties, variable pulse, muscle weakness, convulsions, coma and death from respiratory failure. Handling the plant can cause dermatitis. The plant is poisonous for animals (particularly cattle), which normally avoid it. In Britain the plant is a 'prescription only medicine' and is only obtainable from a registered pharmacist. The toxicity of the plant can vary quite significantly but its deadly nature is so powerful that it must always be treated as poisonous, particularly when it is appreciated that if the hollow stem is used as a 'telescope' and put to the eye, or fashioned into a whistle and touches the lips, this minimal contact is sufficient to cause poisoning. (How else can you blow a whistle) Of course poisoning has also occurred, unwittingly, when it has been harvested in error for a benign plant, although it is understood that it is less potent when dried.

Hemlock's leaves have been confused with those of garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) or wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), the flowers with caraway (*Carum carvi*), the seeds with aniseed (*Pimpinella anisum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* var. *dulce*), or caraway, and the overall appearance with garden chervil (*Anthriscus cereifolium*) and sweet cicely (the latter, *Myrrhis odorata*, is a fresher green colour), and the poisonous roots of hemlock 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 beaver poison (*Cicuta maculata*), of fool's parsley (*Aethusa cynapium*), of hemlock water-dropwort (*Oenanthe crocata*), of pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) and of white bryony (*Bryonia dioica*).

Maculatum is derived from Latin *macula* (spot, stain) meaning 'spotted or blotched' with reference to the markings on the stem.

One authority suggests that the English name Hemlock comes from an Old English word for 'border or shore' *hem* and a word 'leek or plant' *leac*. The name Mother die indicates that this was one of the plants which was never brought inside country homes for fear that the mothers of anyone inside would then experience ill luck and even death.

Dioscorides, the 1st Century Greek physician, introduced it as a medicine for, among other things, herpes and Pliny (23-79), the Roman natural historian and later Avicenna (980-1037), the Arabian philosopher and physician, both considered it useful for the treatment of tumours.

Its association with ancient Greece is probably most often recalled as one of the poisons administered by the State of Athens when executing criminals. It was believed to have been given to Socrates (469-399 BC), the Greek philosopher, who was condemned to death for allegedly corrupting the city youth by encouraging them to seek the truth from the application of repeated questioning, and by failing to worship the accepted gods. The manner of Socrates' death was not novel. Other elderly philosophers, tiring of life, took hemlock of their own choice. This suicide would be accompanied by much ceremony as the philosopher would invite guests and, garlanded, would bid his farewells before taking the lethal cup. [It has been noted that hemlock and punishment for lack of political correctness are probably alluded to in the book of Hosea (chapter 10, verse 4) in the *Bible* – a book that is believed to refer to Israel in about 8 BC which would have been about four hundred years after Socrates' death.]

The English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) makes two or three references to hemlock in his plays. In *Macbeth* it is added to the Witches' cauldron

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf;
Witches' mummy; maw, and gulf,
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock, digg'd i' the dark;

Some authorities point out that, despite its poisonous nature, hemlock has actually been eaten as a vegetable in the past – apparently after careful cooking to neutralize its lethal qualities.

Hemlock has had centuries of association with the devil and witchcraft, no doubt encouraged by its poisonous notoriety.

Records indicate that hemlock came to be known by some of the North American Indian tribes and that while some of the Dakota Indians believed all parts of the plant were poisonous, both the Snohomish and Klallam tribes emphasised the toxicity of the roots. Despite this (or perversely perhaps because of it) the latter believed that root rubbed over a woman's body could be highly seductive.

Medicinally, the root was once used in the treatment of gout, and bruised leaves were applied to the brow to ease swollen eyes. It is said to have been re-introduced to Western orthodox medicine by a Baron Storch of Vienna (who is also said to be responsible for the modern Western medicinal use of thorn-apple, *Datura stramonium*). By early in the 20th Century, leaves and seeds were part of remedies for asthma, chronic rheumatism, neuralgia and syphilis. But today it is rarely employed, even in folk medicine apart from a tincture of the leaves in homoeopathic treatments – and its use as a commercial ingredient in some proprietary medicines.

It is the birthday flower for 15th February.

