



Look for red-purple streaks or spots on the stems.

Hemlock

Why is it a weed?

Competes with desirable species

Where is it found?

Nationwide, common in gardens and pastures

Is it toxic?

Yes, even when dead and dried, but livestock tend to avoid it due to its strong smell



MOST BLOCK owners are aware of toxic ragwort, but far fewer know how to identify hemlock, despite it being one of NZ's most poisonous plants.

Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) is a biennial weed, generally found in isolated patches. However, occasionally it can get out of hand, especially in new pastures where seeds have built up in the soil.

In its second year, it can grow 3.5-4m high, with lots of white flowers. The leaves have a strong, unpleasant, musty, mouse-like odour. However, the smell is often very faint in young plants, so don't rely on smell alone to identify it.

How to control it

Small patches can be hand-pulled – wear gloves to avoid an allergic reaction to its sap.

Sprays such as Tordon™ Pastureboss™ are grass-safe and effective on small hemlock plants but will struggle to kill larger ones.

Seek professional advice before using chemicals, and always read the label.

7 things to know about hemlock

- **IT LOOKS** similar to Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*) in its young, rosette form and when it flowers, but its stems are hair-free and have red-purple streaks or spots.
- **SOMETIMES** mistaken for flat-leaf parsley and fennel. Parsley leaves grow on individual, fine, green stems; hemlock has thicker stems and fern-like leaves. Fennel has much finer leaves, yellow flowers, and a pleasant aniseed smell.
- **TOXIC** to humans and livestock if eaten, even when dried and dead. It can also cause issues if it touches your skin or you inhale its scent, especially during hot weather.
- **MOST** toxic in spring when certain alkaloids in it are most concentrated.
- **EATING** meat from birds that have eaten the seeds can cause toxicity in humans.
- **SPRAYED** plants are more palatable to stock and remain toxic.
- **DEAD** stems can remain toxic for up to three years.

Tip: check pasture and hay paddocks regularly for hemlock – wear gloves to pull out plants and take regular breaks if you're clearing a large area.

Symptoms in stock: nervous trembling, excess saliva, lack of coordination, dilated pupils, rapid, weak pulse, breathing issues, coma, death – can also cause congenital defects if eaten by pregnant stock.

Symptoms in humans: nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, dizziness, trembling, slow heartbeat, paralysis, respiratory failure.

About Gary

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