

Hemlock

Whether in the garden or in the wild we are surrounded by living organisms containing poisons and irritants. We know that these poisons can be dangerous, usually when they are ingested or otherwise enter the bloodstream. A particular risk is of course where something poisonous can be confused with something edible. Probably the most widely publicised of such risks are those associated with fungi.

Poisonous hemlock has been confused with parsley (below left) and coriander (on the right):



However, the most common confusion is probably with cow parsley, also known as wild chervil, "keck" or Queen Anne's lace. Its young leaves taste like something between parsley and fennel, and the roots (cooked) have traditionally been used as a tonic.

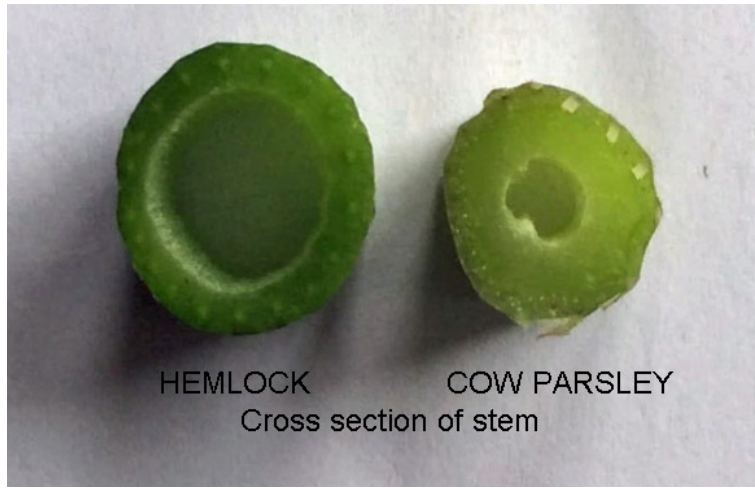
COW PARSLEY
Anthriscus sylvestris
Stems may have a reddish stain,
while hemlock has isolated
blotches like paint splatters



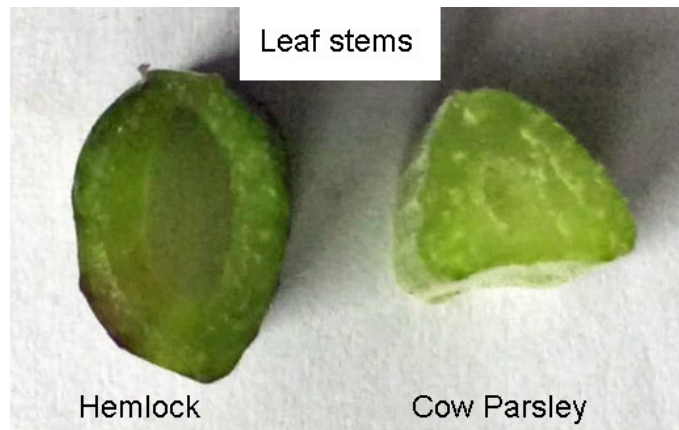
HEMLOCK
Conium maculatum



Mature hemlock leaves are usually darker and shinier.
The stems of cow parsley have pronounced ribs.



The stem walls of the stalks of hemlock are much thinner than the diameter of the central tube, while in cow parsley, the opposite is true.



Leaf stems are also a different shape

Cow Parsley is triangular in cross-section

And mature hemlock smells unpleasant, like mouse urine!

As with any poisonous plant (or one which is unidentified, or "suspicious"), take care when handling hemlock. Use gloves, dispose of the plant safely (it is also poisonous to livestock and domestic animals) and of course, wash hands thoroughly before eating and drinking. There is also a poisonous water hemlock (*Cicuta virosa*), found in marshy areas. In North America, varieties of yew tree are referred to as hemlock.

