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Weed to Watch: Poison Hemlock

Poison hemlock is a problem weed that is beginning to germinate and grow around the county. It is typically seen along roadsides, fallow areas, fence rows, pastures, and creeks. Just as its name suggests, it is a poisonous plant. Touching this plant has caused skin irritation for some people, and is also toxic if ingested by livestock and humans. Therefore, it is important to be able to identify and control this weed.

Poison hemlock is closely related to wild carrot (also called Queen Anne's lace). It has white flowers and lacy leaves similar to wild carrot. However, it is a larger plant, growing to 4 to 6 feet tall when mature. The stems of poison hemlock have purple spots and are hollow and hairless. The whole plant has a musty smell.

Native to Europe, poison hemlock is a biennial, completing its lifecycle in two years. In its first year, it will produce a rosette of leaves close to the ground. In the second year, it will bolt; this means that it will send up a stem, producing more leaves, flowers, and many seeds.

As a biennial, the best time to control poison hemlock is in its first year of growth. If there is only a small infestation of poison hemlock, the younger plants can be removed by hand. It is important to pull out the whole root; otherwise, there is a chance of it regrowing. During this first year when the plants are in the rosette form, they are more susceptible to herbicides. Choosing a herbicide that include the active ingredients of glyphosate, 2,4-D, dicamba, or triclopyr are effective on poison hemlock and can be used for larger infestations. Keep in mind that when working with and around poison hemlock, a minimum of long-sleeved shirt, gloves, long pants, socks, and shoes should be worn to prevent the poison hemlock from irritating your skin. These items should also be worn when applying a herbicide.

If the poison hemlock plants are more mature and in their second year of growth, hand removal becomes more difficult, and herbicides are not as effective since the plant is almost finished with its lifecycle. For these second-year plants, the best option is to mow when the plant is in late flower. This will set the plant back, prevent seed production, and possibly control it.