Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)
Also known as: poison hemlock, devil’s bread, beaver poison, poison parsley

Note: Not related to the eastern hemlock, a coniferous tree in North America.

**Symptoms:** Aye, what a nasty brew! After downing this drink, people feel dizzy within 20 minutes to three hours. Then their heartbeat slows. Soon, they can't move their lower legs. Next, their waist becomes stiff. Once this effect reaches the lungs, victims have naught left in this world, because they can no longer breathe.

*Victim is very aware of what is happening because the mind is not affected until death is quite near.*

Hemlock contains the toxin coniine, which disrupts messages between the nervous system and muscles, causing ascending muscular paralysis.

**Where to find it:** This poison is native to Europe, North Africa and Asia. ‘Tis at home along the borders of pastures and cropland. Because it tolerates poorly drained soils, hemlock can be found near streams, ditches and pools of standing water.

**Anatomy:**
- Smooth, hollow main stalk and stems, with finely divided leaves that resemble parsley.
- Purple blotches on stalk are a key characteristic of the species.
- Fleshy root is sometimes mistaken for wild carrot.
  - It’s easy to differentiate between hemlock and wild carrot. Poison hemlock produces flowers in late spring; wild carrot flowers later in the summer.
- Generally grows from 4 to 8 feet in height.
  - Actually, under certain favorable conditions it can grow an impressive 10 feet high
- Crushed-up leaves of plant have a mousy odor to them.
- All parts of plant are poisonous.
- Highest concentration of poison is in young leaves and seeds.
- Older leaves lose some of their toxicity.
- Dead stalks of this plant will remain toxic for a few years.
  - *The alkaloids that are poisonous in this plant, especially coniine, accumulate in the seeds.*

**Medicinal Uses?**
Hemlock was once used as a general sedative and to treat spasms. But because the difference between a dose that helps and a dose that might kill is so small, it is best not to use it in medicine anymore.

**Socrates’ Draught of Death**

The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was a famous teacher—and victim of hemlock poisoning. In 399 BC, he was accused of corrupting young Athenians with his radical ideas—both political and religious. When a jury found him guilty of his crimes, Socrates had to face the death penalty. At the time that meant he’d have to drink a cupful of poison hemlock. He ne’r saw the light of day again.