

# Identify harmful plants to keep kids and pets safe

**Q**uestion: My children and dog play in the fields near our home. Are there any plants that might harm them? How can I tell which ones they are?



**Debby Finley**  
*Ask a Master Gardener*

**Answer:** We eat many plants and herbs in our daily diet, but we must remember to be choosy. Not all plants are wholesome eating for people or animals. Many poisonous plants are so common and seemingly innocuous that you might not suspect their toxic qualities. In some ornamental plants or flowers, it is only part of the plant that is toxic. In some cases, safe plants look almost the same as their poisonous counterparts.

One of the deadliest plants to humans, pets and livestock in North America is the Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). It can be found growing across much of the United States in dense patches along roads, trails and edges of streams.

Poison hemlock is commonly mistaken for the wild edible Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carota*), which grows in much the same conditions. The flowers of both species are white and bloom in an umbrella-shaped pattern called an umbel. The umbrella shape of Queen Anne's lace is flat-topped, while the poison hemlock umbel is more rounded. However, this would be hard to see from a distance. The flowers of Queen Anne's lace have a single red flower in the center of the umbel. The legend passed down is that Queen Anne pricked her finger while sewing the lace and a droplet of blood fell to the center of the flowers.

Both are in the Apiaceae family, which include carrots, celery and parsnip. They have hollow stems, but the poison hemlock's stem is hairless and has purple blotches. The Queen Anne's lace stems are hairy and have no blotches. The leaves of the poison hemlock are not as hairy as Queen Anne's lace, but more noticeably, the Queen Anne's lace has 3-pronged bracts that appear at both the base of the flowers and the main umbel. All parts of the Poison hemlock (leaves, stem, fruit and root) are poisonous. Leaves are especially poisonous in the spring.

Also poisonous and common in Oregon is the western water hemlock, which hails from the same



PHOTO COURTESY OF PURDUE.EDU

**Poison Hemlock is a poisonous plant seen all across North America.**

Apiaceae family. It only takes a piece of root the size of a walnut to kill a cow or horse. Also known as cowbane, wild parsnip and beaver poison, this plant is herbaceous and thrives along streams, marshes, rivers and irrigation ditches all over the western United States and Canada.

Keep an eye out for the pretty buttercup species (*Ranunculus* species) that causes oral irritation when chewed.

Jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*), also known as thorn apple or devil's trumpet is an annual plant and can be recognized by its distinctive tree-like shape, white or purple trumpet flowers and prickly seed capsules. All parts of the jimsonweed plant are poisonous to horses and humans.

The Nightshade Family (*Solanum* species), including horse nettle, contains solanine in the leaves, shoots and unripe berries that affects the central nervous system and gastrointestinal tract in horses.

A little care and a lot of caution go a long way to keeping your children and pets safe. If you aren't sure about a plant or have a question, please call the Douglas County Master Gardeners.

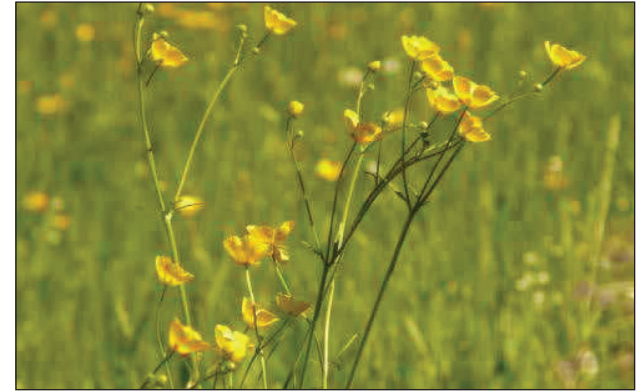


PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

**Buttercups can cause oral irritation if chewed.**

---

*Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*