



CAES

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NATIVE PLANT CAUTION ADVISORY

SPOTTED WATER HEMLOCK

Cicuta maculata, Umbelliferae

Spotted water hemlock, a highly toxic, herbaceous, native perennial plant seems to be increasing in prevalence in Connecticut. The CAES Valley Laboratory has received three confirmed cases of this plant since late June. Spotted water hemlock is a problem because plants are toxic by ingestion or through skin contact to humans, pets and especially livestock. Like poison ivy, response to the plant will vary among individuals. Personal protection such as rubber gloves, long pants, long sleeves along with shoes and socks should be worn when handling this plant. Children need to be taught not to put anything in their mouths without first getting adult permission. Foragers need to be able to accurately identify this plant.

Recent sightings include around a pond in Windsor, in a drainage ditch in Glastonbury and in a large swamp

and marsh in an agricultural area of Wallingford.

There may be a confluence of weather factors, say a warm winter, along with high rainfall and high temperatures



Figure 1. Entire spotted water hemlock plant.
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this season, that allowed this wetland plant to grow more and larger plants this year.

PLANT DESCRIPTION

Plants grow from 4–6' tall (Figure 1). Smooth stems are hollow with purple stripping that may be darker or lighter on individual plants. Leaves are alternately arranged. Foliage can be up to three times pinnate with an odd number of leaflets (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Pinnately compound leaf of spotted water hemlock. © Rose Hiskes

One-to-five-inch leaflets, three times as long as wide, are toothed with veins ending in the sinus not the tip of the dentate margin (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Leaf venation on spotted water hemlock. © Rose Hiskes

The swollen base of the plant is chambered (Figure 4). Older plants may have multiple fleshy tap roots.

White flowers in umbels 2–4" wide develop in June (Figure 5).

Individual flowers have five petals and five stamens. Seed is striped with light colored ridges and dark colored valleys, oval in cross section (2 mm x 1 mm) and two chambered (Figure 6).



Figure 4. Crown area of spotted water hemlock showing chambered pith and taproot. © Rose Hiskes.



Figure 5. Flower of spotted water hemlock with many pollinators. Photo by Dianne Saunders. Used with permission.

LOOK-a-LIKE: Queen Anne's Lace or wild carrot has the same flower heads, but the foliage is feathery. Queen Anne's Lace grows 1–3' tall and will be found on dry sites, not in swamps or at pond edges. Unlike spotted water hemlock (Figure 6), Queen Anne's lace seedheads curl inward, looking like a bird's nest.



Figure 6. Immature seeds of spotted water hemlock. Magnified 20x.
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