

Killer Plants and Common Posers- The Good, The Bad, and The Deadly

Hello from the far north everyone- there has been a lot of media coverage in the past year on the weed known as Giant Hogweed. There are many look-a-likes however, and while one of these species poses little to no threat to human or animal health and it is generally un-palatable to livestock; the other holds the title as the most poisonous plant on our continent, with both being common to our area. But before you panic there are ways you can easily distinguish these species for yourself to better protect you and your livestock.

I will not go into great detail about Giant Hogweed as you can follow the Alberta Invasive Species Council link below for very credible information on the species, but *Heracleum mantegazzianum* ((Sommier & Levier) syn. *Heracleum caucasicum*, *Heracleum giganteum*) has gained quite a following in the media as being a ‘maneater’ of sorts as it does pose a threat to human health causing blistering and burning to those who come in direct contact with its phytotoxic properties. While it is listed as Prohibited Noxious under the Alberta *Weed Control Act* it has not been found anywhere in Alberta let alone within the Special Areas so at this time it is not considered to be a threat to our area.

What every reported case of Giant Hogweed in Alberta has turned out to be, is the native Cow Parsnip, which also grows large in size (5-8ft tall) but is still dwarfed by Giant Hogweed (15-20ft tall). Both plants exhibit large umbel shaped flower clusters with Giant Hogweed flowers being twice the size of parsnip flowers. Cow Parsnip is considered to be a desirable plant in many areas and poses no real threat although in some cases sap may cause some skin irritation if exposed to sunlight after contact, so be careful when handling.

The third piece to this puzzle is the poisonous Spotted Water-hemlock (*Cicuta maculate*), and despite it being crowned the most poisonous plant in North America it is not regulated by the *Weed Control Act* as it is actually native to our landscape. While Spotted Water- hemlock shares the umbel white flower clusters with Giant Hogweed and Cow Parsnip and can be similar in size (6-10ft) to Cow Parsnip but there are again key differences. Look to the leaves- Cow Parsnip will have palmately compound type leaves that resemble an enlarged or slightly distorted maple leaf while water hemlock will have alternate saw-toothed leaves that more resemble blades of grass. They are usually easy to hand pull as they are found in wet areas, as long as you are appropriately protected from the plant with good eye protection, gloves, long sleeves/pants, and footwear- you can control any infestations yourself. If found please take care and wear proper clothing and bag the plants securely before taking to your nearest waste transfer station, All parts of this plant are poisonous and can cause seizures and convulsions; if directly exposed please contact emergency services and get to the nearest hospital immediately.

For more info please follow the links or contact your local Ag Fieldman,

<https://www.abinvasives.ca/fact-sheets>

[http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/prm13959](http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/prm13959)

<http://www.cbif.gc.ca/eng/species-bank/canadian-poisonous-plants-information-system/all-plants-common-name/spotted-water-hemlock/?id=1370403267209>

http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/crops/facts/ontweeds/spotted_water_hemlock.htm

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Special Area #4