

WEEDWATCH #8: Poison Hemlock, Perennial Pepperweed, Scotch Thistle

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Weedwatch is an occasional series of information sheets on invasive weeds in western Washington.



Image courtesy of Thurston County WA

Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*) – This biennial weed is highly toxic to humans and animals. It forms a large rosette in the first year and grows to 12' in the second year. Poison hemlock has hollow, hairless stems with purple blotches, large fern-like leaves (1–1.5') and white flowers that give way to rigid seed capsules. The plant spreads by seed, producing up to 38,000 seeds that remain viable for 6 years. The seeds are toxic, and remain in the soil after the plant has been removed. Manual control of small patches is possible; wear gloves and be sure to remove the entire taproot. Soil disturbance stimulates the seeds to germinate, so replant all disturbed areas with native plants to provide competition. Biological controls in Thurston County with the Defoliating Hemlock Moth (*Agonopterix alstroemeriana*) have demonstrated variable results. Poison hemlock may be controlled by spraying the foliage with glyphosate when the plant is actively growing, before seed production. This species is notoriously difficult to eradicate, so we advise using a licensed applicator to control large infestations. As always read labels and instructions carefully before using any chemical treatment.



Photo courtesy of Natureinthecity.org

Perennial Pepperweed (*Lepidium latifolium*) – This adaptive, aggressive weed tolerates soil conditions from salty, wet soils to pastures and riparian areas. The extensive roots spread from tiny fragments, and can overrun native vegetation. Mature plants grow 3–6' tall, with branching semi-woody stems. Waxy, hairless leaves have prominent white midribs. Tiny white blooms emerge from June–September, and infestations can produce 6.4 billion seeds per acre! Pepperweed is difficult to control manually—even small infestations require repeated pulling, as re-growth is inevitable. At least 6–8" of root must be removed, and the plant material should be disposed at a landfill. Chemical control of pepperweed in sensitive aquatic areas should be done by a licensed applicator. The previous year's woody growth must be removed first, and then glyphosate should be applied between bud break and bloom.



Photo courtesy of emmitsburg.net

Scotch Thistle (*Onopordum acanthium*) – This large biennial or winter-annual thistle can grow 8–10' tall, depending on soil moisture. Soft white hairs cover the well-branched leaves on both surfaces. Sharp, yellow tipped spines line the leaf margins, midribs and flower buds. Single purple blooms, or sometimes clusters, occur from June to September, producing 8,400–40,000 seeds annually. Large infestations can compete with native vegetation for nutrients and water. Scotch Thistle's seed coat must be leached away before germination can occur, so the seed may remain dormant in the soil for years before germinating, especially on moist sites. This species can be controlled effectively by hand pulling before the blooms occur; dispose of the debris to avoid regrowth. Be sure to plant areas with native vegetation and monitor areas for regrowth. Chemical control can be accomplished with glyphosate, spot spraying the plants in the spring when actively growing.

Using chemical controls on invasive weeds is always a last resort. Read and follow all label directions and restrictions. Further information can be found on <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/tcweeds/>.