

Poison Hemlock Isn't Officially Noxious, But It Is Intrusive, Dangerous And Abundant In Southwest Missouri

SPRINGFIELD, MO.

Weeds have had an ideal environment in southwest Missouri to flourish during the last three years. Dry weather in 2011 and 2012 weakened established grass and ample moisture during the 2013 spring has allowed weed seeds to come on like gangbusters.

The most opportunistic weed at this point in southwest Missouri appears to be poison hemlock according to Eldon Cole, a livestock specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

"Poison hemlock is not on Missouri's noxious weed list but many farmers feel it's more of a headache than some plants that are on the list," said Cole. "The biennial plant can be controlled with herbicides in the late fall or very early spring. Normally the toxicity is reduced, but not totally eliminated when dried, as in hay."

IDENTIFICATION

Missouri's noxious weed list includes: marijuana, musk thistle, Canada thistle, field bindweed, common teasel, cut-leaved teasel, purple loosestrife, Scotch thistle, kudzu, multiflora rose and Johnsongrass.

Poison hemlock is a highly visible plant since it reaches usually 5 to 7 feet tall this time of year.

"It's in full bloom now with an abundance of white blossom clusters. The favored location is along streams, ditches and old barn lots although it can be found about anywhere," said Cole.

Poison hemlock has a big, hollow stem with purple spots on it. Many refer to it incorrectly as wild carrot. Cole says there is an odor to the plant sometimes described as "mousy."

IMPACT ON LIVESTOCK

True to its name, the plant is moderately to highly poisonous to cattle, horses, swine and sheep. The most toxic parts of the plant are roots and seed. Affected animals show signs within two hours of eating it.

"Most animals do not eat it other than nibbling on the leaves. To create a toxic condition requires cattle to eat 1 to 2 pounds of the material," said Cole. "Fortunately I don't know of very many deaths attributed to it around here. I suspect at this time of year the plant will be coarse

enough it will be sorted out from any grass-legume hay and not be eaten. The risk to animals should be minimal unless they have nothing else to eat."

Symptoms include nervousness, trembling, incoordination and death in some cases. Pregnant cows that graze poison hemlock may experience birth defects in their calves such as cleft palate and spinal abnormalities. The critical time in the pregnancy for cattle is 40 through 70 days.

MU Extension Guide sheet G-4970, "Plants Poisonous to Livestock," is available online. There are a number of poisonous plants that lurk in Missouri pastures, ditches and fencerows that can harm and even kill livestock that eat them along with baled forage.

The most common poisonous plants of Missouri include black cherry, black locust, black nightshade, bouncing bet – also known as soapwort – bracken fern, buttercup, common cocklebur, field horsetail, jimsonweed, johnsongrass, milkweed and mustard species, Ohio buckeye, poison hemlock, common pokeweed, snow-on-the-mountain, water hemlock, white snakeroot, wild indigo and wooly croton. Some of the toxic species, like wooly croton and mustard, are relatively harmless unless the animal ingests large amounts.

If livestock poisoning is suspected, call a veterinarian immediately and remove livestock from the grazing area until all poisonous plants have been destroyed.

CONTROL MEASURES

"Hemlock is becoming a real problem and is on the order, if not greater than knapweed in its infestation," said Tim Schnakenberg, an agronomy specialist with University of Missouri Extension. "It can be eradicated by applying a recommended herbicide early in the year and later in the year every effort should be made to minimize seed production. This may be done by mowing in the bloom stage."

Recommended control is to use Remedy Ultra, Tordon 22K or Grazon P+D before poison hemlock bolts in the early spring. It may also control it in the fall in the rosette stage. Δ