

FEATURED NOXIOUS WEEDS – SUMMER 2022

It is hard to single out only one species of noxious weed that stands out in the month of July, so why not look at a few all at once? In San Juan County, three noxious weeds are currently grabbing attention as they flower: common teasel, tansy ragwort, and poison hemlock.

All three species are required to be controlled in San Juan County, and all are biennials, completing their life cycles in two years, more or less. Two of these weeds—tansy ragwort and poison hemlock—are poisonous to people, pets, livestock, and wildlife. And so they get more of our attention when it comes to our urging the public to get them under control. By “control”, as in RCW 17.10—Washington State’s noxious weed law—it means that one has to prevent the weed from going to seed or spreading in a given year. So in the case of these three weeds, it is critical to get flowers contained (cut and bagged) BEFORE they go to seed.



Tansy ragwort (*Jacobaea vulgaris*), which is believed to be the cause of death for several head of cattle on Orcas Island back in the 1990s, is a readily recognizable flowering plant in the summer and early fall, with its bright yellow flowers that are daisy-like in arrangement (composite)—typical of its family (Asteraceae). You can find it on abandoned lots, forest edges, roadsides, meadows, hayfields and recently disturbed ground throughout our county. It seems to prefer a lot of sunlight but can tolerate partial shade in forest understories, and it tolerates a range of soil moisture conditions. Plants can grow to be up to six feet or more in height, but it may bloom close to the ground as well if mown or cut. As with many biennials, tansy ragwort will typically survive mowing.

Tansy ragwort in the fall and winter often appears as a leafy rosette, and come the following spring, it will bolt or grow tall and eventually develop buds and flowers. Bloom time varies from year to year but typically gets going in early July or late June. All parts of the plant are poisonous, so special care is needed when handling tansy ragwort (wear gloves). If consumed, its toxins can accumulate and cause permanent liver damage, except in sheep, which can metabolize these compounds. Cattle, horses, pigs, goats, humans and their pets are potentially affected. When tansy ragwort winds up in a hayfield, it can be especially dangerous, as the plant may lose its characteristic bitterness or odor when baled with grasses and can thus be accidentally consumed along with the rest of the bale. Or, the animal may simply not be able to tease out the tansy from the desirable forage.





Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*), as the name suggests, is also poisonous, and if enough is consumed, it can be fatal. Given the similarity to wild carrot (*Daucus carota*), which is a member of the same family (Apiaceae), poison hemlock taproots are occasionally consumed by accident, with potentially tragic results (both taproots are white and carrot-like). Telling the two plant species apart can be challenging at first. Both species have saucer-shaped flower heads (umbels) that resemble an umbrella, and tiny flowers within each inflorescence are white. Leaves are fern-like and very similar in appearance, though poison hemlock leaves are often a darker green and somewhat shiny in appearance. One big distinction between the two is that wild carrot (also known as Queen Anne's lace) is pretty hairy on its stems and leaves, while poison hemlock lacks obvious hairs. An even more obvious

trait, when both have grown tall, is that poison hemlock's stems are hollow and commonly have red splotches or streaks on them, while wild carrot stems, though reportedly hollow, are not obviously so when alive. There may be fine, red lines on wild carrot stems, but not red splotches. And again, wild carrot's stems can be quite hairy. Finally, wild carrot normally doesn't get much bigger than maybe four feet tall; poison hemlock can be six or more feet tall. And both are biennials, so mowing will typically result in survival and flowering at a much lower height. If you have pets or children, or enjoy preparing foods from wild edibles, you should definitely get to know poison hemlock very well! Be sure to wear protective clothing if handling poison hemlock, and do not burn it.





The final noxious weed species that may catch one's eye of late is called **common teasel** (*Dipsacus fullonum*), which is a Class C species and required for control in our county. Though somewhat similar in appearance to our noxious thistle species (bull thistle and Canada thistle), teasel is actually in an entirely different family, which is called the Dipsacaceae (or Caprifoliaceae, depending on whom you believe). The most distinctive feature of teasel is noted when it develops its large, egg-shaped flower heads, each with many small flowers with their own small bracts, similar overall in appearance to a pincushion. The flowers may bloom in concentric rings, starting at the midpoint of the inflorescence and working their way gradually towards the top and bottom. Each tubular flower (lilac or pale purple) can produce one seed (achene), with perhaps hundreds of seeds per head. Underneath the egg-shaped inflorescence are long, slender involucral bracts that were apparently used years ago in textile processing (carding wool). The overall appearance is formidable.

Teasel, being a biennial, spends its first year as a rosette, and the following spring, larger rosettes will typically bolt and eventually flower that summer or fall. If teasel is cut, the plant usually survives as a "short-lived perennial" and will manage to eventually flower. Seeds normally mature in the fall after flowering, but teasel can still develop viable seeds asexually, in a phenomenon known as apomixis. Another interesting thing about teasel that might get your attention is that its stem leaves are held in pairs and clasp the stem, trapping water where they meet. This water can trap insects, which after drowning, may provide some nutrition for the plant, according to one paper.

Though teasel is not poisonous, its main problem in San Juan County is that it is spreading, taking away space from other, more desirable plant species. You may find it in ditches, roadsides, meadows, formal landscapes, utility rights-of-way, and other disturbed ground. The movement of soil by heavy machinery is a common way for teasel to arrive at new sites. Fortunately, teasel seeds only last a few years, so it is possible to eventually get the better of this noxious weed species.

Together, tansy ragwort, poison hemlock and common teasel make for a memorable (if depressing) summer of weeds in bloom.

