water hemlock

Cicuta maculata

Kingdom: Plantae
Division/Phylum: Anthophyta - flowering plants

Features

Water hemlock is a biennial herb. (It lives two years.) Its stems are upright, branched, hairy, and up to seven feet tall. The leaves are triangular in outline and divided into many leaflets that are up to four inches long. The white flowers are about one-tenth inch long and arranged in clusters up to four inches across. Fruits are nearly spherical, smooth, and up to one-fifth inch long. The plant has a cluster of fleshy tubers (underground stems) at its base that resemble small sweet potatoes.

Natural History

Water hemlock grows in wet soil, roadside ditches, and marshes. It flowers from June through August. Most parts of this plant are poisonous. Cicutine extracted from the tubers was prescribed for sick and nervous headaches in the past. Klamath Indians used juice from the water hemlock in a mixture to tip poison arrows. It is rare in western Iowa and common elsewhere.

Habitats

natural lakes and prairie marshes; interior rivers and streams; wet prairies and fens

Iowa Status

common; native

Iowa Range

scattered throughout Iowa in suitable habitats

Bibliography

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. 2001. *Biodiversity of Iowa: Aquatic Habitats* CD-ROM.