The Deadly Look-Alikes Chart

Six pairs every forager, gardener and grandparent should know

In the old country, children learned the dangerous plants before the useful ones: this one you pick, this one you never touch. North America has its own deadly plants, and several look a lot like the herbs and berries people go out to gather.

This chart covers the six mix-ups that matter most. Print it, stick it on the fridge, and put a copy in your foraging bag.

WHO SHOULD SKIP IT

The 100% rule. Never eat a wild plant, or make a tea, tincture or remedy from it, unless you are **100% sure** what it is. Not 90%. Not "pretty sure." Check every feature in this chart, confirm with at least two good regional field guides or a local expert, and when in doubt, throw it out.[1]

A few more rules Babushka would add:

- **Check the whole plant,** not just one leaf. Look at leaves, stem, flowers, smell, where it grows and what's underneath.
- **One plant at a time.** Don't stuff a basket with mixed greens and sort them at home. A single poison leaf can hide in a bunch of good ones.
- **Children pick nothing to eat** without an adult checking it first. Teach them: "Ask before it goes in your mouth."
- **Photos and apps help, but they are not proof.**

"The forest feeds the one who knows it, and buries the one who guesses."

The chart

Deadly plant	Often mistaken for	The tell	Babushka's rule
Water hemlock and **poison hemlock**	Wild carrot (Queen Anne's lace), yarrow, elderflower	Hemlocks have smooth, hairless stems, often blotched with purple. Water hemlock grows in wet ground; poison hemlock smells musty. Wild carrot has a **hairy** stem and smells of carrot. Elder is a **woody** shrub	Never pick a white "umbrella" flower on a green stem unless you are certain

Deadly plant	Often mistaken for	The tell	Babushka's rule
Foxglove (first-year leaves)	Comfrey and mullein leaf rosettes	Foxglove leaves are soft and downy with finely scalloped edges. Comfrey is rough and bristly. Mullein is thick and woolly like flannel	Spring rosettes without flowers: leave them alone
Lily of the valley, autumn crocus	Wild garlic: ramps and ramsons	True wild garlic **smells of garlic** when you crush a leaf. Lily of the valley and autumn crocus do not	Crush every leaf. No smell, no pick
Death camas	Wild onion	Wild onion **smells of onion**. Death camas has no onion smell and grass-like leaves with a V-shaped fold	No smell, no pick
Pokeweed berries	Elderberries, blackberries	Pokeweed is a tall, soft-stemmed plant with red stems and berries in long hanging clusters. Elder is a woody shrub with flat sprays of tiny berries. Blackberries are bumpy and grow on thorny canes	Know the bush before you pick the berry
Nightshade berries	Blueberries	Blueberries grow on woody shrubs and have a little five-pointed crown at the tip. Nightshade berries are smooth, with no crown	No crown, no pick

How to tell them apart

1. Water hemlock and poison hemlock vs wild carrot, yarrow and elderflower

These are the most dangerous plants on this chart. Water hemlock is described as probably the most toxic plant in North America.[2] All parts of water hemlock are deadly, and even a small mouthful can kill an adult.[3]

Water hemlock (*Cicuta*)[4]

- Grows in wet places: marshes, ditches, stream banks and shorelines.
- White flowers in umbrella-shaped clusters (umbels).
- Hollow stem, often purple-mottled. Cut lengthwise, the base of the stem shows **chambers**, like rooms stacked on top of each other.
- Fat, tuber-like roots.
- Never use the hollow stems as straws or whistles.

Poison hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)[5]

- Smooth stems spotted or mottled with purple, often with a white waxy coating that rubs off. Can grow taller than 9 feet.
- Fernlike leaves with a musty smell.
- All-white flowers, with no purple center.
- The sap can blister skin. Wear gloves and long sleeves if you have to pull it.

The safe ones and how they differ

- **Wild carrot (Queen Anne's lace): hairy** stem with no purple blotches, a carrot smell when the leaves are crushed, and often one dark purple floret in the middle of the flower head.[6] Foragers say: "Queen Anne has hairy legs." Wild carrot also grows in dry places, not wet ones.[7]
- **Yarrow** (*tysyachelistnik*, "thousand-leaf"): very finely cut, feathery leaves and a flat-topped cluster of tiny daisy-like flower heads, each with its own few petals. It is a much smaller plant than a full-grown hemlock. Yarrow's feathery leaves can still be mistaken for a young hemlock, so if a plant has no flowers yet, leave it.
- **Elderflower** (*buzina*): grows on a **woody shrub or small tree**, never on a soft green stem. Its leaves are divided into several toothed leaflets set in pairs. A hemlock is never woody. Remember that elder leaves, stems and raw berries are also poisonous: use only the flowers and properly cooked ripe berries.[8]

WHO SHOULD SKIP IT

Wild carrot, parsley, fennel, chervil, angelica and the hemlocks are all one family with umbrella flowers. Unless you are a trained botanist, don't gather any wild white-umbrella plant for food or medicine.

2. Foxglove vs comfrey and mullein rosettes

In its first year, foxglove (*Digitalis*) does not flower. It sits low to the ground as a rosette of leaves, and in spring it can look a lot like comfrey or mullein. Foxglove contains powerful heart poisons (cardiac glycosides). Comfrey has been confused with foxglove, causing poisonings, including one death.[9]

- **Foxglove:** softer, downy leaves with finely toothed edges. Tall spikes of purple, pink or white bell flowers come in the second summer.
- **Comfrey:** leaves feel **rough and bristly**, like fine sandpaper, and the leaf base runs down the stem like a little wing.
- **Mullein:** very thick, **woolly** grey-green leaves, soft as flannel. A tall yellow flower spike comes in the second year.

These differences are easy to describe and hard to judge on a small spring plant. If you can't be sure, wait until it flowers, or leave it.

Comfrey is on our Skip list for anything you swallow. Its liver-damaging alkaloids led the FDA to advise removing oral comfrey products from the market in 2001.[10] So even when you have the right plant, comfrey is for the outside of the body only.

A leaf with no flower has no name yet. Wait for summer.

3. Lily of the valley vs wild garlic (ramps and ramsons)

In spring, the broad green leaves of wild garlic come up in shady woods. In Europe this is ramsons (*Allium ursinum*), called *cheremsha* in Russia. In eastern North America it is ramps, or wild leeks (*Allium tricoccum*). Lily of the valley (*Convallaria*) grows in the same shady places, and its leaves look much the same. It is a heart poison, like foxglove.

- **The smell test:** rub a piece of leaf between your fingers. Ramps and ramsons smell of garlic. If a leaf doesn't, leave it alone and wash your hands.[11]
- **The trap:** the smell from an earlier leaf stays on your fingers and can fool you on the next one.[12] Wash your hands, and test each leaf fresh, one at a time.
- **Other look-alikes:** German food-safety experts also warn about autumn crocus (*Colchicum*), which can be mistaken for ramsons.[13] In North America, foragers are also warned about false hellebore (*Veratrum*) near ramps. Neither smells of garlic.

No garlic smell, no garlic.

4. Death camas vs wild onion

Death camas is an incredibly toxic plant, and all its parts are unsafe to eat.[14] It grows in grassy places and has a small bulb, just like wild onion. Both have small white or cream flowers, so flowers and bulbs won't tell you which is which.[15]

- **The smell test:** wild onions smell like onion, whatever the species. Death camas does not. This is the biggest difference.[16]
- **Leaves:** wild onion leaves are darker green, softer and smoother, with a U-shaped channel. Death camas leaves are lighter green, more like grass, with a V-shaped fold.[17]
- **Don't confuse it with true camas** (*Camassia*), an edible bulb gathered by Indigenous peoples of the West. True camas has blue flowers. Death camas flowers are creamy white.[18]
- **Signs of poisoning** include heavy drooling, a numb mouth, great thirst, stomach pain, vomiting, confusion, heart and blood pressure problems, and trouble breathing.[19]

5. Pokeweed berries vs elderberries and blackberries

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is one of the most common late-summer purple berries. All parts of pokeweed are toxic, especially the roots, young shoots and unripe berries.[20]

- **Pokeweed:** a big, soft-stemmed plant that dies back in winter and can grow up to 9 feet tall. Mature plants have **red to magenta stems** and large leaves set one at a time along the stem. White flowers from July into fall, then berries that turn from green to purple to almost black.[21] The berries hang in long, drooping, finger-like clusters, each berry smooth and slightly flattened.
- **Elderberry:** a **woody** shrub. Leaves set in pairs and divided into several leaflets. Many tiny berries held in a **flat or umbrella-shaped spray**, not a long hanging finger. Even true elderberries must be cooked, with all stems removed. In 1983 in California, juice made from wild elderberries crushed with their leaves and stems made a group of people sick, and eight were flown to hospital.[22]

- **Blackberry:** grows on **thorny**, woody canes. Each berry is a cluster of tiny bumps, not a smooth single bead.

Pokeweed poisoning can cause vomiting, bloody diarrhea, spasms and, in serious cases, trouble breathing.[23]

Know the bush before you pick the berry.

6. Nightshade berries vs blueberries

Nightshades, relatives of the tomato and potato, grow as weeds in gardens and along forest edges. Treat every wild nightshade berry as poisonous, ripe or not.

- **Blueberry:** grows on a **woody** shrub. Each berry has a little **five-pointed crown** at the tip, like a tiny star or a king's crown.
- **Black nightshade:** a soft, green, leafy weed, not a woody shrub. Small white star-shaped flowers with a yellow center, then black berries in small clusters. **No crown.**
- **Bittersweet nightshade:** a climbing vine with purple star-shaped flowers with a yellow center. Oval berries that turn from green to orange to bright red.

If someone eats an unknown plant

WHEN IT'S THE DOCTOR, NOT THE CABINET

Call 911 now if the person has collapsed, has a seizure, has trouble breathing or can't be woken up.[24]

Otherwise, call Poison Help right away, even if they seem fine.

- **US:** 1-800-222-1222 (free, confidential, 24/7)[25]
- **Canada:** 1-844-764-7669 (1-844-POISON-X)[26]
- **Québec:** 1-800-463-5060[27]

While you call:

1. **Take away whatever is left.** Gently remove any plant still in the mouth.
2. **Don't make them vomit,** and don't give salt water or any home remedy, unless the poison centre tells you to.
3. **Keep a sample.** Put the plant in a bag: leaves, flowers, berries and roots if you can. Take clear photos. Bring them to the hospital.
4. **Note the details:** what was eaten, roughly how much, when, and the person's age and weight.
5. **Skin contact** with poison hemlock or other irritating sap: wash with soap and water and watch for blisters.[28]

Write the poison number on the inside of the kitchen cupboard, where Babushka kept her herbs. Then you never have to look for it.

From *The Babushka Remedies* by Max Sidorov. The full book includes *Safe Foraging: 25 Wild Remedies and Their Deadly Look-Alikes*, with photos side by side, plus the Tested, Trusted or Skip label on every remedy.

This chart is for education. It is not a complete guide to poisonous plants, and it does not replace a field guide, a local expert or medical advice.

Notes and sources

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