

# Hemlock

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It used to be thought that death by hemlock was painful and ugly, with spasms, choking and vomiting; but we now know, thanks to classicist and amateur toxicologist Enid Bloch, that the particular species of hemlock used for this purpose in ancient Athens (*Conium maculatum*, available on the slopes of nearby Hymettus) was effective, but not especially violent. Its effects, in fact, are pretty much as Plato described them in the closing pages of his dialogue *Phaedo*, a beautiful and profound work set in prison on the last day of Socrates' life. Plato correctly portrays his beloved mentor dying a gradual death by paralysis, leading finally to asphyxiation. His body was then collected by family and friends and accorded the traditional rites.