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POISON IVY What you've been *itching* to know

by Margaret M. Cooley

Poison ivy appears in many forms and thrives in many places. Knowing its tricks can help you stay itch-free this summer.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) can take many forms. While it is technically a woody plant, the woody stem is sometimes obscured by dense green leaves. Poison ivy may occur as a self-supporting shrub, a trailing vine, or as a hairy vine that climbs trees and walls. In each case, the distinguishing characteristics are the same. The old saw “Leaves of three, let it be,” is partly inaccurate—each group is actually one leaf with three leaflets.

You can identify poison ivy by the stem of the center leaflet, which is longer than the stems of the side leaflets. The leaflets can have smooth, lobed or toothed edges. New growth has a reddish tinge, especially in spring, while deep green summer leaves are shiny and even sometimes waxy in appearance. Oak-shaped leaflets often lead to the mistaken identification of poison ivy for its cousin pest plant, poison oak, which is not native to New York State.

Poison ivy bears clusters of small, whitish-green flowers, which become small green berries. In early fall, the leaves turn yellow or orange when other plants are still green. The berry-like fruits change from green to off-white in the fall. In winter, poison ivy plants lose their leaves.

Poison ivy tolerates a wide variety of climatic and soil conditions. East of the Rocky Mountains, it is commonly found on sand dunes, in back yards, lawns, along roads and in forest soils.

That Awful Rash

The poison ivy rash is caused by urushiol, (yoo-ROO-shee-ol) an oil that is found throughout the plant. The oil is colorless or pale yellow and oozes from any cut or crushed part of the plant. After exposure to air, urushiol turns brownish-black.

The oil penetrates within three to five minutes after touching skin. There are no immediate symptoms but people who are sensitive may develop a rash, swelling, itching and blistering within 12 to 48 hours. In a few days, the blisters may become crusted and begin to scale. The rash may take 10 days or longer to heal. Scratching can irritate the rash and cause infection.

Only the oil can spread the rash; the fluid within the blisters cannot.

The thinner the skin, the more quickly the rash develops. This phenomenon often makes it seem like the rash is spreading, when in fact it just takes longer to appear on parts of the body with thicker skin, such as the soles of the feet.

Sensitivity to poison ivy develops only after the first contact with urushiol. This is because the human body does not produce the reaction-causing antibodies

against the oil until after first contact. At second contact, the antibodies are already available to cause the reaction. About 85 percent of people develop a reaction on second contact. Sensitivity to poison ivy usually declines with age.

Some people are very sensitive and can develop a severe rash with blisters, extreme swelling of the face, arms, legs or throat, difficulty breathing or swallowing, dizziness and even unconsciousness. Severe reactions require medical attention.

People can pick up the oil by direct contact, by indirect contact (such as pets that bring it in from the field on their fur) or in smoke from burning plants. Poison ivy is most dangerous in the spring and summer because the oil is plentiful in new growth and this is when the plants bruise most easily. Cases sometimes occur in winter when people burn wood that has the oil on it or cut poison ivy vines for wreaths.

Stop the Itch

The best way to avoid a poison ivy rash is to prevent contact with the plant or its oil. When frequenting areas known to harbor the plant, wear gloves, long sleeves, long pants and avoid sandals. If you do contact poison ivy, wash all exposed areas with cold running water as soon as possible. If done within five minutes, you may be able to keep the oil from penetrating your skin. Within 30 minutes soap and water can reduce the chance of severe reaction and prevent the spread of the oil. Wear gloves while removing clothing or outdoor gear with oil on it and wash clothes separately in a washing machine with detergent. Be careful not to spread the oil to rugs or furniture in your house.

If you have a reaction, relieve the itching by taking cool showers and applying calamine lotion. Taking a lukewarm oatmeal bath or applying a baking soda paste (three teaspoons of soda to one teaspoon water) may help. Over-the-counter creams containing hydrocortisone may soothe a mild rash.

A Friend to Wildlife

Poison ivy is not all bad. In fact, it provides food and shelter for wildlife. For example, flickers and other woodpeckers eat the berries. Mammals such as bears, rabbits, and deer eat the leaves, stems, twigs or seeds. The roots of poison ivy can also prevent erosion, especially on sandy soil where few other plants grow. Poison ivy helps hold together many sand dunes on Long Island.

If, however, you find the presence of poison ivy in your yard intolerable, you can dig it out. The plant is tenacious, so it may require several tries. This is because poison ivy can spread through above- or below-ground rhizomes or runners. You can also apply commercial herbicides, but read and follow the label instructions for your own safety and for the safety of wildlife in your area. Don't forget to take precautions and wear protective clothing—even dead plants and roots can contain urushiol.

Despite a bad reputation, poison ivy is an important plant. Knowing the characteristics of its different forms can help prevent unfortunate run-ins. Keep a few cautions in mind and you should stay itch-free.

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ALL IN THE FAMILY

Poison oak and poison sumac are closely related to poison ivy.

Eastern poison oak (*Toxicodendron quercifolium*) is a shrub that contains urushiol oil. Poison oak causes the same symptoms as poison ivy. Poison oak is only found in the sandy soils of the coastal southeastern states, but not in New York. This plant is characterized by hairy fruit, trunk and leaves. Each leaf has three oak-shaped leaflets, with the middle leaflet on a longer stalk.

Poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) is a shrub found in swamps and bogs from Quebec to Florida. It has compound leaves with 7 to 11 leaflets which are bright green with smooth edges. The center leaf stem is bright red. The end leaflet is on a longer stalk than the others. Poison sumac has small greenish flowers that produce glossy, cream-yellow fruit. Like poison ivy, poison sumac also causes skin irritation. The common sumacs with red berry clusters that we see in New York are not poisonous.