

Profile

Poison ivy is one of the most notorious plants in North America. It does not spare age, sex, race or economic status. It and poison oak account for an estimated ten percent of lost work time in the U. S. Forest Service.

The first published records of poison ivy in North America date back to the early 1600s in the writings of Captain John Smith. In fact, Captain Smith coined the common name because of its superficial resemblance to English ivy or Boston ivy.

Poison ivy is a harmful vine or shrub in the cashew family. It grows plentifully in the eastern United States and Canada. Usually a vine twining on tree trunks or straggling over the ground, it often forms upright bushes if it has no support to climb upon.

Species related to poison ivy include poison oak, which grows in the Pacific Northwest and nearby regions of Canada, and poison sumac, which grows in the Eastern United States. Poison oak and poison sumac both are shrubs.

Poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac have poisonous sap (urushiol) in their roots, stems, leaves and fruit. The sap is released when the plant is bruised, making it easier to contract Rhus-dermatitis (poison ivy used to be classified in the genus *Rhus*) in the spring and early summer when leaves are tender.

The sap may be deposited on the skin by direct contact or by contact with contaminated objects such as shoes, clothing, tools and even pets. Severe cases have occurred from sap-coated soot in the smoke of burning plants.

The sap normally stays active for one to five years on any surface, including dead plants.

Because urushiol is inside the plant, brushing against an intact plant will not cause a reaction. But undamaged plants are rare because poison oak, ivy and sumac are very fragile plants. Stems or leaves can be broken by the wind or animals, and even tiny holes made by chewing insects can release urushiol.

Poison Ivy *Toxicodendron radicans*



Leaves aren't the only nasty parts. People can get a wicked rash from yanking the vine out by the roots, even in the winter, or just by brushing against a root or stem. Using a weed eater or lawn mower to remove poison ivy can result in splattering the sap on legs and other exposed areas.

Some people appear to be immune and others to become immune. However, people can gain or lose immunity, so assuming immunity because reactions have never developed in the past is foolish. People change as they age.

The first symptom of poisoning is a severe itching of the skin. Later, a red inflammation and a blistering of the skin occurs. In severe cases, giant red, oozing sores develop.

The rash only spreads through direct contact with the sap (urushiol) and it does not spread as the result of contamination from the blisters.

People who know they've been exposed to poison ivy can take several steps to prevent or minimize a potential rash. Rinse with lots of cold water, as from a garden hose, right away. Hot water opens pores and lets the oil in, so taking a hot shower could be disastrous.

Usually within 15 minutes of contact, the urushiol binds to skin proteins.

If it is washed off with soap and water before that time, a reaction may be prevented. Once the antigen is fixed, however, it cannot be washed off or

transferred to other areas.

Once a rash develops, the oil has been absorbed and poison ivy can't spread. If big blisters filled with liquid develop, they are mostly water and will not spread the rash even if they break. New lesions that appear a few days after the primary lesions represent less sensitive areas or areas where less antigen was deposited. They are not from a spreading of the antigen.

The rash can last anywhere from one to three weeks, depending on how bad it is and how it is treated. Prescription remedies make it go away much faster.

Once the itching starts, a couple of home remedies may help relieve the itch (but not the rash): take a shower in the hottest possible water that's bearable for as long as it's bearable, which may ease the itch for up to eight hours; or, spray with a deodorant containing aluminum, which most do. For a serious case, a doctor is a necessity.

Getting rid of poison ivy in a yard isn't easy. Contact while pulling it out by the roots can cause a terrible rash, and it will likely grow back until every last bit of the root is removed.

Burning isn't good because the antigen-laced smoke can get in lungs and nose and cause unbelievable sickness.

Continual mowing might cause it to give up and die, but mowing can also cause contact. Cutting it off at the ground, letting the vine die, and then continual recutting until it gives up will work, but that may take several years.

Spraying with a broadleaf herbicide works, but frequently that kills just the parts above ground and the roots may resprout. In addition, spraying may also kill harmless, desirable plants that are nearby.

Poison ivy isn't all bad. It feeds wild birds and animals who eat it without ill effects, and it holds the earth very well against erosion.