HELPLINE HAPPENINGS
JULY 2024
"What to do About Poison Ivy"
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Chipmunk feeding on ripened berries Photo: Gary P Bell, Bugwood.org

Birds love it, bees and wasps love it, even mammals in your yard love it, but gardeners? Not so much. *Toxicodendran radicals*, better known as poison ivy, is native to the Northeast. Happy in many different environments, poison ivy has adapted to a wide range of soil conditions, from moist to very dry and impoverished soil. As a result of this adaptability, poison ivy thrives to torment.

IDENTIFICATION:

- The one guarantee: the plant will have three leaves.
- Leaves are in groups of three, with the middle leaflet larger than the two on the other sides.
- Each leaf measures 2 to 4 inches long and leaf edges may be smooth, lobed, wavy or toothed.
- Deciduous woody vine that attaches to trees and other objects for support; mature vines are thick and develop hairy, fuzzy aerial roots as anchors.



summer leaves
https://www.canr.msu.edu/



yellow or green flowers/mid-summer
https://www.maine.gov/



Mid-May leaves
Rob Routledge/Bugwood.org.



Fall color of poison ivy. Photo: Steve Dewey, Utah State University, Bugwood.org

GROWTH HABITS:

- Spring (Mid-May) - new growth droopy and reddish green.
- Summer - Early on clusters of small yellow-green flowers appear in the axis of leaves; in late summer, white waxy fruits develop
- Fall - leaflets turn vivid orange, red, and yellow

CONCERNS:

- Allergic reaction progressing from linear rash and itch to blisters and open sores. Severity of reaction depends on sensitivity.
- Urushiol oil, which causes the reaction, is in all parts of the plant and can penetrate the skin within 10 minutes of contact.
- **Warning:** the oil persists in dormant and dead plants and can remain potent for years on anything it touches. **NEVER** burn poison ivy since the smoke can carry the oil. **DON'T** use firewood from which poison ivy has been removed.
- Call your doctor if you have a severe reaction or if the rash is present in sensitive areas.



https://www.rwu.edu/sites/default/files/downloads/healtheducation/poison_ivy1.pdf

CULTURAL CONTROL:

- For a few sprouts you can dig them up, making sure to get the roots. Best time for removal is early spring after rain, when the ground is soft. (For larger patches, physical or mechanical strategies are not encouraged.)
- Bag the vines and throw them away in the trash.
- Goat herds are now being used to clear poison ivy; however, they do not eat the roots.

CHEMICAL CONTROL:

- Most effective during active growth periods, especially in early to mid-summer.
- For larger patches, use a non-selective herbicide containing glyphosate or triclopyr. Read the label directions carefully and protect surrounding valuable plants.
- On trees, first sever the vines to eliminate the flow of moisture from roots and immediately apply the herbicide to the cut end. **NEVER** spray directly overhead.

PROTECT YOURSELF:

- Cover exposed skin by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, protective gloves and boots when working around poison ivy,
- Launder clothes separately from the rest of your laundry.
- Sanitize tools that came in contact with the plant.
- If you suspect contact, rinse skin with cool soapy water or rubbing alcohol within an hour of contact. (Do not wash with hot water as heat will open your pores to the oil.)
- **NEVER** use string trimmer or chainsaw around poison ivy, which can result in the splattering of the oil.

COMMONLY MIS-IDENTIFIED AS POISON IVY:

- Virginia Creeper - it is also a native climbing vine that has berries loved by wildlife; however, Virginia Creeper
    - typically has five leaves (but can have three during early growth)
    - has smooth vines, not hairy

- bears small, dark blue berries
- Leaves turn brilliant red in autumn.



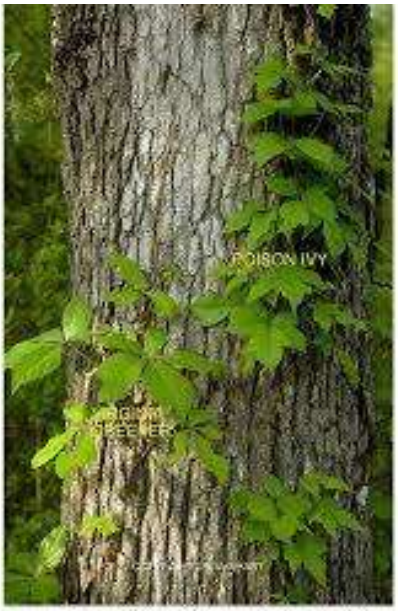
https://www.canr.msu.edu/resources/virginia-creeper-parthenocissus-quinquefolia

FUN (?) FACTS

- Poison ivy can appear as an upright, three-foot tall shrub
- Sensitivity to poison ivy can change at any point in one's life.

MYTHS

- Scratching poison ivy blisters spread the rash. ***False*** - oil is spread by hand only before the rash begins.
- Poison ivy is catching from one person to another. ***False***
- Once allergic, always allergic. ***False***



The differences between poison ivy and Virginia creeper are shown very well in this image by Dr. James Manhart of the TAMU Department of Biology, from the Vascular Plant Image Gallery at www.csdl.tamu.edu/FLORA/gallery.html

Sources Used

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