WVDA

Poison Ivy & Its Control

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Poison Ivy

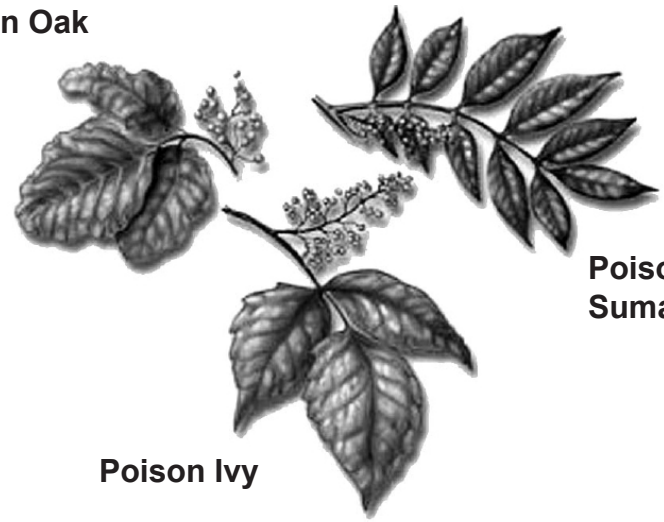
Each year thousands of people suffer painful skin inflammations from contact with poison ivy (Rhus radicans). Yet many people do not recognize this plant which occurs in almost every part of the United States and is widespread in West Virginia.

"Leaflets three, let it be!" is an old saying that reminds us of the consistent leaf character of poison ivy. However, many who heed this little saying are often unduly wary of some harmless plant while still failing to spot poison ivy.

Poison Ivy is not an ivy species. In fact, it belongs to the cashew family and is known by different names such as poison creeper, three-leaved ivy, markweed and picry. Poison ivy may grow as a vine attached to trees, fence rows or other objects from which it gains support. It may also be a shrub trailing along the ground or in the open and it sometimes takes the form of an erect woody shrub.

Poison ivy flourishes in the deep woods where moisture is ample as well as on very dry and exposed hillsides or road banks.

No matter which form it takes, the leaf is almost always composed of three leaflets. The individual leaflets may be as long as four inches or they can be considerably smaller. Under optimum conditions in a greenhouse, the leaves can grow as large as dinner plates. The margins vary from being smooth to irregularly toothed. The fruit appears as clusters of waxy, white berries which may aid in the identification of the plant after the leaves have fallen in the fall.



Poison Oak

Poison Oak (Rhus quercifolia) is not known to occur in West Virginia. The nearest concentrations of any size are probably located along the coastal plain of North Carolina, although the range extends north to Maryland and approaches the southern boundary of West Virginia.

The western poison oak (Rhus diversiloba) is native to the Pacific Coast States and occurs nowhere close to West Virginia.

Poison Sumac

Poison Sumac (Rhus vernix) grows as a coarse shrub with smooth gray bark in mountain bogs and swamps. It is exceedingly rare in West Virginia, but it has been found in very localized areas of Mineral, Pocahontas, Upshur, Preston and Randolph Counties. This plant is also known as swamp sumac, poison elder, poison ash, poison dogwood and thunderwood.

Poison Sumac shrubs may attain the stature of small trees up to 25 feet high, but usually occurs as a shrub from five to eight feet high. The leaves have from seven to thirteen leaflets arranged in pairs with a single leaflet at the top.

The leaflets are oval in shape, three to four inches long and one to two inches wide. They have no “teeth” or serrations on the edges and have a smooth velvety texture and bright orange color when they first appear in the spring. Later they become dark green and glossy on the upper surface, pale green on the lower surface and they have scarlet midribs.

Several other species of sumac are far more common in West Virginia than the poison sumac

These species usually have more than 13 leaflets per leaf and the leaflets have a serrated or toothed margin. One, the smooth sumac, has smooth leaflet edges similar to poison sumac; however, it is readily distinguishable by the many leaflets. Dwarf sumac has fewer leaflets like the poison sumac but may be distinguished from it by the winged midrib of the leaf. The midrib of poison sumac is never winged.

Poisoning

The skin irritant of these plants is called urushiola nonvolatile phenolic substance that is apparently found in all parts of the plant except the pollen. The sap in the resin ducts contains the poison and for that reason the danger of poisoning may be greatest in the spring and summer when sap is more plentiful. The resin canals must be broken in order to release the resin; so it is impossible to get poisoned by just walking by the plant. This may also be the reason that the first person walking through the patch seldom gets poisoned.

A very small quantity of the poisonous substance is capable of producing severe inflammation of the skin on suspectable individuals. Clothing may become contaminated and is often the source of prolonged infection that may be mistakenly judged a case difficult to cure. Dogs and cats can transmit the poison from their fur to children or others who pet the animals. The soot particles in smoke from burning poison ivy carries small gloubles of the resin and has been reported to cause severe cases of poisoning. The common belief that eating of a few leaves of poison ivy will lead to the development of an immunity is totally unfounded. Don't attempt it! No part of the plant should be taken internally.

The most effective way to prevent poisoning is to avoid the plants. If it is necessary to work among them, some measure of protection can be had by wearing protective clothing and gloves which should be carefully removed and laundered when the work is completed. Some creams and lotions give protection by preventing the poison from contacting the skin or by making the removal of the poison easier by washing. Such washing with a good strong alkaline soap is often effective even without a lotion if done soon after the poison has been contacted. Research has indicated that the beginning of the rash is almost instantaneous upon contact, although prompt washing will lessen the amount of poisoning. For treatment consult your physician.

Eradication of Poison Ivy Plants

Poison ivy can be removed by digging, pulling or applying herbicides. A single treatment with modern herbicides can kill the leaves and most of the roots. There are places, however, where herbicides cannot be used, such as in hedges and shrubbery where the poison ivy is closely mixed with valuable plants. In such areas, hand pulling may be the only satisfactory method of removal.

Chemical sprays can be used at any time when poison ivy is in full-leaf, with June and July being the best months. Sprays should be applied when there is little or no air movement, preferably in the early morning after the sun has warmed the leaves, although some recommend high noon as the proper time.

Control will seldom be 100 percent effective at the first attempt. Repeat treatments will usually be needed. **Remember,** the dead portions of remaining plants **are probably still toxic** and therefore should be **handled with care.**

For additional information on poison ivy and/or the proper herbicides to use for poison ivy removal, contact your county extension agent or the West Virginia Department of Agriculture's **Plant Industries Division** at 304-558-2212.

Contact Information

Plant Industries Division
Phone: 558-2212
Fax: 558-2435

Communications Division
Market Bulletin
Phone: 558-3708
Fax: 558-3131
marketbulletin@wvda.us

Executive Division
Phone: 558-3200
Fax: 558-2203
www.wvagriculture.org

West Virginia Department of Agriculture
Walt Helmick, Commissioner
1900 Kanawha Boulevard, East
Charleston, WV 25305
www.wvagriculture.org