

Perpetual Poison Ivy! An Itch That Won't Quit! By Cindy Eusey *Toxicodendron radicans*



Poison Ivy is one of those noxious weeds that cause grief and misery whenever most humans come in contact with it. It is a woody vine that is well known for its ability to produce urushiol, (pronounced oo-roo-shee-ohl) a skin irritant that causes an itching rash for most people. It grows throughout Ohio and most of North America. It is normally found in wooded areas, especially along edge areas. It also grows in exposed rocky areas, in open fields and disturbed areas. It is not uncommon to find it creeping into a flower bed, around a tree or along side a house. Older vines can climb up the side of a tree and send out lateral branches that are so large that they are mistaken for tree branches!

In the spring, the abundant triads, of somewhat shiny almond-shaped leaves, are usually light green. As the plant matures the leaves turn a darker green and by fall become bright red. Each leaflet has a few or no teeth along its edge, and the leaf surface is smooth. Leaflet clusters are alternate on the vine, and the plant has no thorns. These three characteristics: (a) clusters of three leaflets, (b) alternate, and (c) lack of thorns, are enough to positively identify the plant. If it is growing up the trunk of a tree, the presence of abundant reddish root-hairs will identify it. This is the basis of the memory aid such as "Leaves of three, let it be; variations include "... hairy vine, no friend of mine", "... berries white, run in fright" and "... berries white, danger in sight". The berries, which appear in August through November, are a grayish-white color. They are eaten by some birds and the seeds are dispersed after going through the digestive tract.

Approximately 15% of people have no allergic reaction to the oil in the poison ivy plant. However, if you are in the majority, exposure to poison ivy leaves, vines or roots can not only be annoying but also life threatening. The first symptom of contact is a severe itching of the skin that develops into reddish colored inflammation or non-colored bumps, and then blistering of the skin occurs. In severe cases, clear fluids ooze from open blistered sores. Once the urushiol poison has had contact with the skin, it is quickly bound to the skin. The oozing fluids released by itching blisters do not spread the poison. The appearance of a spreading rash indicates that some areas received more of the poison and reacted sooner than other areas.

Be aware of burning brush that may contain poison ivy leaves, vines or roots! If poison ivy is burned and the smoke then inhaled, this rash will appear on the lining of the lungs, causing extreme pain and possibly fatal respiratory difficulty. If poison ivy is eaten, the digestive tract, airway, kidneys or other organs can be damaged. i.e. eating wild berries that grow next to poison ivy plants.

Urushiol oil can remain active for several years, so handling dead leaves or vines can cause a reaction. In addition, oil transferred from the plant to other objects, such as pet fur or your clothing, can cause the rash if it comes into contact with the skin. If you find you have been in contact with poison ivy, wash the affected area with cold soapy water within 10 or 15 minutes. If itching occurs, try cortisone creams applied frequently. If you are plagued with oozing blisters try to get the area to dry with baking soda. If you have a severe case, better see a doctor. Expect infected areas to be around for up to two weeks.

Here's a good hint: If you are going to be involved with weeding or in the woods where poison ivy occurs, try applying bubble bath straight to your skin before going out. When it dries, the bubble bath will create a barrier between the oil from the plant and your skin. When you come in, just wash the bubble bath away. Don't forget to wash exposed clothing as soon as possible. A little education and prevention is the best medicine for that perpetual itch that won't quit!