

Poison Ivy - Not Just a Weed!

With all the rain we've had this spring, our plants are so green and lush...unfortunately, the weeds are as well. It doesn't take a hike in the woods to find poison ivy - it often can be found just about anywhere, and may take many forms. Learning about this pervasive plant - how to recognize it, what to do if contacted, and how to control its growth if necessary will protect you and your family from unnecessary itchy misery, not only this summer, but throughout the year.

What is Poison Ivy?

Eastern Poison Ivy is the common name for the scientific *Toxicodendron radicans*. Not limited to wooded spaces, this highly adaptable plant can be found in sun, shade, wet and dry areas from the east coast into Canada and throughout the Midwest. It may appear as a woody or non-woody shrub, low growing or vining, from fields, fencelines, roadside ditches, to your home landscape.

The name is coined not from the poisonous nature of the plant itself, but from the oily substance called "urushiol" (pronounced *oo-roo-shee-awl*) present in all parts of the plant (even dead plants!) This oil is a skin irritant causing an intensely itchy blistering rash which may appear within minutes or hours of contact exposure.

Avoiding contact will prevent exposure, but the first step is learning to identify the plant.

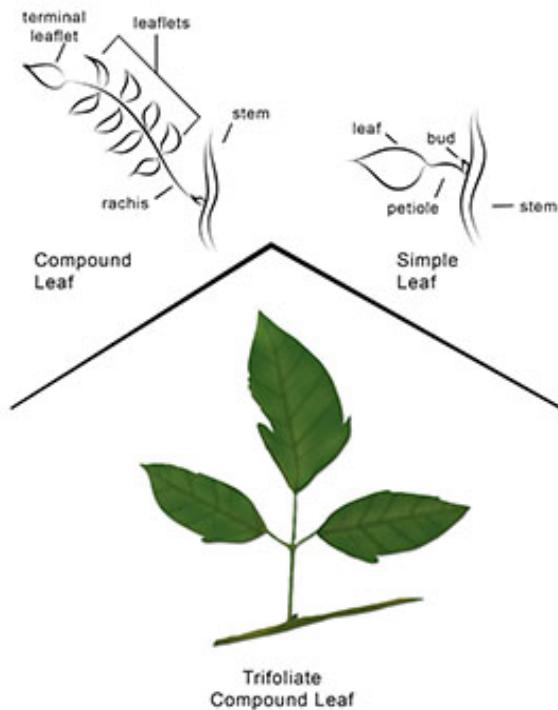
Identifying Poison Ivy

Understanding leaf structure is key to poison ivy identification.

Poison ivy has what is called a "trifoliate compound leaf". In layman's terms, poison ivy has three leaflets grouped together into one structure that is attached to the stem (the whole structure is considered one "leaf"). Contrary to say, a maple leaf, which has one leaf attached to the stem (simple). The illustration to the right shows the difference.

Other possible identifiers include:

- Young, emerging leaves are often greenish-red
- Leaves may or may not appear waxy, but are always smooth and never hairy
- Leaf margins may be jagged or irregular
- Leaves turn orange, yellow or red in fall
- Fruits form in clusters of whitish-green berries



Prevention and Control

Poison ivy is a tough perennial plant and eradication will take effort. The roots, or rhizomes, are aggressive and must all be killed to eliminate regrowth. Never attempt to burn the plant, even after removed from the soil, as inhaling the airborne oil may cause severe respiratory problems.

For smaller, younger plants less than a couple years old, hand-pulling and digging when the soil is wet may be effective. Ensure complete skin coverage by wearing long pants, sleeves and gloves, and launder these items separately from the family wash.

Larger and older infestations will likely require multiple applications of a selective herbicide. Selective herbicides such as those containing dicamba or 2,4-D, which are designed to kill broadleaf plants and are safe for use in grasses, are acceptable options. Triclopyr is also an option, but only for use in and around cool-season grasses (not to be used on warm-season grasses such as Bermuda and Zoysia). However; special care should be used to avoid situations where drift or volatilization (vapor movement) might encounter desirable broadleaf species. Non-selective herbicides like Glyphosate (Roundup) may also be used, but it will also kill grasses and desirable plants. Always carefully read, understand and follow label instructions when using any herbicide product.

Contact Symptoms and Treatment Options

The best trick to avoid exposure is to avoid contact with the plant's oil, urushiol. Even contact with objects - tools, clothing, pets - that may have the oil on them may transfer to skin and cause the rash. Topical lotions containing bentoquatum may offer some protection. Wash skin with rubbing alcohol, or degreasing soap and running water (not just water), and scrub under nails within thirty minutes. Cleansing contact items (including tools and pets!) may be necessary, as the oil can remain on those surfaces for months.

Over-the-counter oatmeal baths, hydrocortisone creams and Benadryl may bring temporary itch relief for smaller rashes, which if left alone, may heal in a couple weeks. For larger or dangerous exposures (eyes, mouth, genitals) or those with accompanying fevers, skin infections or breathing difficulties, contact your physician immediately.

Don't let poison ivy ruin your summer fun. More information is available from the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and others through the [links at the end of this article](#).

Resources

[OSU: What You Need to Know About Poison Ivy](#)

[Guide To Effective Weed Control: PSS-2750](#)

[Cornell CALS - Plants Database](#)

[University of Missouri Extension: Poison Ivy Identification and Control](#)

[Natural Resources Conservation Service Plants Database](#)

[FDA: Outsmarting Poison Ivy and Other Poisonous Plants](#)