

“LEAVES OF THREE LET THEM BE”



Gardeners, hikers, hunters and other outdoor types, know the old adage in the title. This distinguishing feature of this native plant of the genus *Toxicodendron* of the sumac family is called poison ivy in the eastern part of the United States where it is abundant. Gardeners, because they are usually ‘up close and personal’ to plants, compare poison ivy experiences as badges of courage.

To avoid contact with poison ivy you must be able to recognize it. Poison ivy is a glossy-leaf perennial plant that spreads by both seeds and woody rhizomes. It usually appears as a trailing vine or aerial-rooted vine with alternate leaves that consist of three leaflets. The edges of the leaflets may be smooth or toothed and can vary in size. They are usually bright green and turn various shades of yellow, orange, red, or bronze in the autumn. Poison ivy does flower and produce berries. There are both male and female flowers, normally found on separate plants, and they are clustered, small, cream to yellow-green in color. The fruits are also clustered, green to yellow in color and waxy appearing. Poison ivy usually is found in woody areas but often shows up in lawns and landscapes. It is often confused



with Virginia Creeper, another perennial trailing vine-like plant. But where Poison Ivy has three green leaflets, Virginia Creeper usually has five leaflets. When in doubt, treat the vine with respect. That way you do not end up “treating” yourself for the rash that results from poison ivy contact.



The result of contact with the juices of poison ivy is poison ivy dermatitis. Reactions to the plant differ from person to person, from little or no reaction to the plant to highly susceptible when in the vicinity of the plant. The rash may develop commonly within 24 to 48 hours after contact and can last as little as one week. For more serious cases, the rash may last as long as three weeks. Because the plant is so common and the juices such highly potent sensitizers, perhaps three-fourths of the American population acquires poison ivy dermatitis at some time.

The juices of the plant contain an oil, urushiol, which is produced in the leaves, flowers, fruits and bark of stems and roots. Because the oil is almost non-volatile, the oil can be carried from the plant on clothing, shoes, tools, soil, fur of animals, and by smoke from burning plants. Poisoning may occur from infected clothing as long as a year after the clothing was infected. So persons highly sensitive to poison ivy can easily get a rash.

There are products on the market, such as Ivyblock, that are designed to form a protective layer over the skin that urushiol cannot penetrate. The effectiveness of any product would depend upon the sensitivity of the person and the thoroughness of the application of the product. When contact is made with poison ivy, the only way to prevent the rash is to immediately wash the affected area; immediately means within 15 minutes, not at the end of the day.

Part of gardening is dealing with Mother Nature. This is one time when you are better off to use chemicals to kill the vine rather than using the more environmentally friendly process of pulling up, cutting up and throwing the weed in the compost pile. For more information on this plant or other subjects related to horticulture and gardening, contact the Chesapeake Master Gardener answer-line at 382-8502 or e-mail us at gardener@agri.city.chesapeake.va.us.

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