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LEAVES OF THREE, LET ME BE!

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



Ask anybody what their least favorite plant is and chances are the answer will be poison ivy! It probably is also one of the most recognizable plants, especially if one learns the perils of contact the hard way.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is a woody, vining plant with compound leaves, each consisting of three leaflets. Leaves start out reddish in the spring, changing to an all green summer wardrobe. In autumn they turn rather nice shades of gold and burgundy. Individual leaflets may have smooth, toothed or lobed edges. Flowers are not very noticeable but they are followed by a cluster of white, waxy berries that may persist through the winter. The berries are often eaten by birds and spread in their droppings.

It has been estimated that about 70 percent of folks living in the U.S. will experience dermatitis from contact with poison ivy or its relatives, poison oak and poison sumac. These plants contain the phenolic compound, urushiol that causes the skin irritation. It is found in all parts of the plant including the berries and roots. Urushiol is a very stable compound. Even after a poison ivy plant is killed, it will take about a year for the urushiol to degrade and be rendered harmless.

Also, this compound remains active even during the winter months and it can be transferred from one object to another. Sensitive people may develop a rash from exposure to contaminated clothing, tools, animals and other objects. Wash exposed items thoroughly with soap and water. Never burn poison ivy as the smoke can cause serious internal irritation.

Control options fall into two categories. Either you can remove it manually or use an herbicide. Very small patches can generally be dug out. Be sure to wear gloves, pants and a long-sleeved shirt. Contaminated clothing should be laundered separately. Wash them 2 or 3 times to remove the urushiol. If patches of poison ivy occur in areas that can be mown, the continuous cutting down of the foliage will eventually result in control.

Several herbicides are labeled for poison ivy with glyphosate (Round-up) being most commonly available. No herbicide will give you a 100 percent kill with one application. The key to ridding the yard of poison ivy is persistence. Two, three or even more herbicide applications may be necessary.

Now through September is a good time to apply herbicides to poison ivy as the plants are actively translocating. This means what is taken up by the roots and leaves is moved quickly throughout the plant. Much of the herbicide that is applied to the leaves will get moved into the roots and stems giving you a greater degree of control than herbicides applied in early spring or late fall.

Herbicides come either ready to use or as a concentrate, which is mixed with water and then applied. If you decide to purchase a concentrate, also buy a sprayer to be used only with herbicides. It is very difficult to clean herbicides from sprayers and residues may harm desirable plants.

Spray on a calm, windless day. Thoroughly apply the herbicide to the poison ivy leaves until it begins dripping off. Keep in mind these herbicides will kill or severely injure any plant they touch. Leaves should begin to brown in about 2 weeks following application.

For poison ivy vines growing up trees, sever the stems and immediately 'paint' some herbicide on the fresh cut to avoid resprouting. Do not get any herbicide on the tree bark.

Several products are available at local garden centers which can help keep you rash free if you need to wrestle with this unpleasant plant. These can be applied to your skin before tackling poison ivy and form a barrier that the urushiol cannot penetrate and last for several hours. I have found them to be quite effective. You still want to wash up good at the end of the day.

Winning the war against poison ivy is not easy. Be persistent, and the victory will be yours! For questions on identifying or controlling poison ivy or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.