

## Re-Visiting Poison Ivy (published 2025-10-04)

Phil Blevins, Extension Agent, Agriculture  
Washington County, Virginia

Eastern poison ivy is often seen growing on buildings, trees, or in fence rows as a vine, but western poison ivy grows as a small shrub or “ground cover” in the woods or in waste areas. As a vine it can grow from 60 to 100 feet long. As a shrub, it can be up to 6 feet tall. The best way to identify poison ivy is by the leaflets. The leaflets grow in clusters of three (“leaves of three, let it be”). These leaflets are from two to four inches long with pointed tips. The middle leaflet is usually larger than the others. The edges of the leaflets might be smooth or serrated. The leaflets are varying shades of green, and they may be shiny or dull. In the fall the leaves turn to a reddish color.

All parts of the poison ivy plant, including the roots, stems, bark, and leaflets, are poisonous year-round. The blistering rash people get is caused by an oily toxin known as *urushiol*. Any time a plant is bruised or injured, the sap oozes from the plant and the potential for coming in contact with it exists. **Do not burn poison ivy.** The smoke will also cause the allergic reaction which can be quite severe. It is very important to avoid breathing the smoke if someone is burning it. The sap can also be carried on pets (for up to two weeks on their hair), on tools, or any other item which has been in contact with the plant.

If you come in contact with poison ivy, wash the exposed skin with cool soapy water within 20 minutes to remove the sap before it penetrates the skin. Using hot or warm water may allow the sap to penetrate the skin quicker. Do this even if you wear gloves and protective clothing. Wash your clothes in the hottest water possible with regular laundry detergent to be sure the oily toxin is removed. After you put your clothes in the washer, wash your hands immediately.

The rash can appear from a few hours to several days later and is recognized by the fluid filled blisters it produces. Contrary to popular belief the rash is not spread by the fluid from these blisters. Generally, the rash will run its course in about two weeks. If your reaction is severe, it may be necessary to see a doctor.

If you develop a rash from contact with poison ivy, a few tips can help reduce the itching. Hydrocortisone cream 1%, calamine lotion, and oatmeal baths can help ease the discomfort. An oral antihistamine may also help. A cold ice pack can also provide temporary relief. Avoid scratching the rash because it may break the skin and result in an infection. Also do not use rubbing alcohol, bleach or hydrogen peroxide on the rash. These agents can increase irritation.

Poison ivy can be controlled in several ways. Repeat mowing or clipping the vine at ground level will eventually kill it but be careful not to touch the discharged bits of plant from a mower. It can be pulled by gloved hands but can regrow if any root is left behind and require repeat removal. As a last resort, an herbicide can be applied to the leaves and stems. For situations where the plant is growing in or on a desirable plant, the herbicide can be applied to the leaves using a sponge or “wick applicator”. Several applications may be required to a mature woody vine. Contact your local Extension agent for more information. Always follow the label instructions if using an herbicide.

Although considered a vile weed, poison ivy has benefit to wildlife. The berries and leaves are a source of food for birds, reptiles, deer, goats and amphibians. The vines can provide wildlife shelter. And flies, bees, wasps, ants, and butterflies eat the flowers. Because of its wildlife benefits, it is not necessary to remove it from areas with little to no human activity.

The best way to dodge a poison ivy rash is to learn to recognize it and what to do if you contact it. There are a few lucky ones (about 10-15% of humans) who are immune to the toxin. But most of us are at risk. Be careful out there.

## Resources

“*Toxicodendron radicans*,” <https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/toxicodendron-radicans/>

“Poison Ivy,” <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HO/HO-218-W.pdf>

“Ask ACI: Poison Ivy Clothes Washing,” <https://www.cleaninginstitute.org/cleaning-tips/clean-home/ask-aci/ask-aci-poison-ivy-clothes-washing>

“How to Identify, Avoid and Treat Poison Ivy,” <https://www.chop.edu/news/health-tip/how-identify-avoid-and-treat-poison-ivy>

## How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

*The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.*