

Another vine

mess

It's not going away anytime soon,
so we're going to have to deal with poison ivy
Story and photos by Mark E. Johnson

The old familiar rhyme that most folks use to identify a poison ivy plant goes: Leaves of three, let it be.

However, for the many unfortunates among us who have ever suffered from an agonizing, full-blown poison ivy rash, a more appropriate saying might be: Leaves of three, run away like you're being chased by an angry rhinoceros.

Many would place this innocuous and not unattractive plant alongside mosquitoes at the top of the "What was Mother Nature thinking?" list, but it's a maddening fact of life for thousands of American farmers, gardeners, hunters, and homeowners. In either its climbing (*Toxicodendron radicans*) or non-climbing variety (*Toxicodendron rydbergii*), poison ivy occurs in every portion of the U.S. and southern Canada except for the high-altitude mountains and deserts of the Far West. Some estimates say more than 90 percent of humans are susceptible to developing an allergic reaction if exposed enough times, and twice will usually do the trick.

Put simply, if you live in North America, there is probably a poison ivy plant growing nearby, and if you touch it, you're most likely going to get a rash if you don't take the proper steps to avoid it.

What are those steps? There's really only one that's effective, and it's not very complicated, says Dr. Drew Claudell, a dermatologist at Rivergate Dermatology in Goodlettsville.

"Immediately wash with plain ol' water," he advises. "The rash is caused by an oil called urushiol that is found in the leaves, vines, and

roots of this plant, and it can easily be washed off with water. The key, however, is timing. You have to wash soon after exposure occurs. Our research shows that if you wait 10 minutes, only 50 percent of the urushiol can be removed. After 30 minutes, only 10 percent can be removed. After an hour, you're pretty much out of luck."

Tom Mueller, a University of Tennessee agriculture professor and weed specialist who is currently conducting a study on poison ivy, says that washing immediately can have amazing results.

"As you can imagine, I'm called on to do a lot of poison ivy eradication," says Mueller. "I use rubber gloves when handling the plant, but above all, I wash immediately. I haven't had a poison ivy rash in 20 years."

Both Mueller and Claudell point out that there are several persistent myths related to poison ivy. Here are a few of their "favorites."

- *A poison ivy rash can be spread through the bloodstream or by scratching an existing rash and distributing the fluid found in blisters.*

Not true, says Claudell.

"Only direct contact with the urushiol oil will cause the rash," he says. "The reason people believe they're spreading it is because they distributed the urushiol in several different places upon original contact with the oil. Depending on the concentration of that exposure, a rash somewhere else might appear several days later than the original rash. Logically, it seems like it's spreading. Also, when you scratch and disturb the rash, it tends to get worse. This also adds to the perception. But the fact is, a poison ivy rash is not contagious."

- *You can't contract a rash from a dead poison ivy plant.*

Again, not true, says Mueller.

"Even when you kill the plant with

a glyphosate herbicide like Roundup, the urushiol is still present for months and possibly years," Mueller says. "We don't know exactly how long it takes for it to degrade, but some of the worst situations come from people who have killed a poison ivy vine in the summer, waited until winter when they thought it was safe, and ripped it out of the tree without proper protection. Remember, it's not the plant you have to worry about; it's the oil.

"And the oil can be transferred from the fur of a dog that's run through a patch, clothes in a hamper, pruners, bushhogs, and most definitely a dead poison ivy plant."

- *Poison ivy has never bothered me, so I must be immune.*

Guess what? Think again.

"Most people are exposed first sometime during childhood and don't have a reaction," Claudell explains. "Then, with their second



Homeowners in new suburban developments are often faced with challenges like the enormous poison ivy vine — possibly two to three decades old — growing on the lower third of this tree. In cases like this, experts advise severing the vine to kill the upper vegetation and eliminate the plant's berry production as a food source for birds that, in turn, propagate the plant in the neighborhood.

This vine is representative of the typical look of poison ivy in Tennessee and surrounding states. However, depending on soil conditions and time of year, the leaves can be red and sometimes serrated.

or third exposure, there might be a problem. The immune system has 'memory cells' that will 'recall' that chemical and react with a pretty brisk response. There are very few people who don't react at all to urushiol. It's a matter of time."

• *You can contract a rash just by being near poison ivy.*

"True and not true," laughs Mueller. "Is the oil going to jump through the air and land on you as you walk by? Absolutely not. However, the very worst-case scenario for poison ivy happens when people burn it. The oil actually becomes airborne in the smoke, and if you inhale it, it can seriously injure your lungs. Also, you can get into trouble by weed-eating a patch of poison ivy, which can spray the oil all over you. If this happens, immediately find a shower or water source and wash off thoroughly."

What if all fails and, despite your best efforts, you contract the rash anyway? Home remedies abound, from the application of banana peel, Miracle Whip, toothpaste and buttermilk to wild peach tree, buckhorn plantain, fiddlehead fern, and poke root. But Claudell recommends a trip to the doctor.

"If you catch it early, I would probably prescribe an ultra-potent, topical steroid," Claudell. "This would be in the form of an ointment or cream. Some over-the-counter steroids are OK, but in many cases you just end up chasing the rash, and it will rebound in a week or two. If the rash is further along, you might need to go to a systemic steroid in the form of an injection. An advanced case can evolve into weepy, painful blistering, secondary infections, and permanent scarring. It's best to catch it early and treat it aggressively."

Mueller advises aggressive eradicating of poison ivy plants as well. But when using glyphosate herbicides like Roundup, he stresses patience.

"Poison ivy grows very slowly," Mueller says. "Because of this, the herbicide will work much slower than on many other plants. It might take 30 days before you notice a significant change. Also, the leaf has a waxy surface that makes penetration of the chemical more difficult, so I recommend mixing a simple surfactant with your herbicide. A drop or two of laundry detergent in your pump sprayer works fine."

For large vines, Mueller advises a different approach:

"At a convenient height, three or four feet, cut the vine in two. If it's a really large vine, this might require a chainsaw. Everything above the cut will obviously die, but you can either treat any new growth from below the cut with herbicide or paint it on the surface of the wound. Remember, a large vine will have an extensive root system, so it might take a long time to kill the whole thing. You might

just have to treat the suckers as they appear."

"And don't forget," Mueller adds. "If you use a chainsaw to cut the vine, have a bucket of water and a washcloth handy. You're going to need it!"

For more information

To learn more about poison ivy, contact your local University of Tennessee Extension office or an area dermatologist for medical information. Comprehensive Web sites devoted to poison ivy research include the Poison Ivy, Oak, & Sumac Information Center at www.poisonivy.aesir.com/view/welcome.html and What Poison Ivy Looks Like at www.poison-ivy.org



White County Farmers Cooperative livestock specialist Kyle Frasier, left, helps Tennessee Farmers Cooperative feed/animal health specialist Jacob Sparkman prepare and apply buckhorn plantain juice to an outbreak of poison ivy rash on Sparkman's wrist. Buckhorn plantain juice is one of many natural remedies used by farmers and homeowners to battle the symptoms of the rash.

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