

Poison Ivy – leaves of three, let it be – remember this when enjoying Mother Nature
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We've all heard the phrase "leaves of three, let it be." It would be good advice to pay attention to those words when approaching *Toxicodendron radicans*, better known as poison ivy. This poisonous North American plant produces urushiol, which is a clear liquid compound found within the sap. This liquid can cause an irritating, itching rash when contact is made. Identification of the plant may save you a lot of heartache and misery. Make sure next time you go out into the woods you know what you're looking to avoid!

Three characteristics will help you to identify the pesky plant. The leaf clusters are always in three, the leaves are alternately arranged on the stem and there are no thorns on the stems. If you don't know what poison ivy looks like and you come in contact with a plant that has these characteristics, just avoid it to be on the safe side. The plant you are looking at may be perfectly harmless but better to stay away if you're unsure.

In the winter time, the appearance of the plant can even confuse experts. Unusual growth patterns or loss of leaves can fool even the most experienced outdoorsman. When leaves are not deformed, they are almond-shaped and can range from a light to dark green. In the fall, the leaves will turn a reddish color. The leaves can be a little shiny and are usually about 1 ½ to 3 inches long. Each leaflet has a few or no teeth along the edges and the surface is smooth. Poison ivy can grow as a vine or shrub. When vines are growing on a tree, the adventitious roots adhere to the bark. It can also spread from rhizomes or root crowns.

Poison ivy reproduces either vegetatively or sexually. Flowering occurs from May to July and the blooms are a yellow-green-white color and located in clusters above the leaves. The plant produces a grapelike clustering fruit which appears in the fall and is a grayish-white color. Birds enjoy the fruits and the seeds remain viable after passing through their digestive systems, helping the plant to propagate elsewhere.

When humans come in contact with the plant, it often causes an allergic reaction. Some fortunate people are not bothered by the poison in the beginning, but may become sensitized with repeated contact. Over 350,000 people in the United States are affected by poison ivy annually. The liquid within the sap, urushiol binds to the skin where it causes severe itching that turns into inflammation and blistering. If the blisters are broken, the poison will not spread. If you have come in contact with poison ivy, a rash may develop within a week of exposure and it may last up to four weeks.

If poison ivy is burned it is also toxic. If the smoke is inhaled, a rash may develop in the lungs, which causes extreme discomfort, pain and may even be fatal. If consumed, the plant may cause damage to the digestive tract. The urushiol oil from the plant may remain active for several years. Therefore, handling the plant even when it is dead, may cause a reaction. Pets may transfer the oil from their fur to human skin. If clothing, gloves or tools have come in contact with the plant, they should be thoroughly washed before re-use.

If you do come in contact with the plant, try treating the affected area with Calamine lotion, oatmeal baths or baking soda. Over the counter products to relieve the itching may also be effective.

Is there anything good about the plant? Absolutely; it feeds the wildlife which eat the seeds and are not effected by the poison. It is great for erosion control in some areas and the Native Americans used it for medicinal purposes.

Don't let this poisonous plant keep you from enjoying Mother Nature. A little time on your part to study and learn how to identify it will give you a sense of confidence when you're out in the woods. Just like knowing about snakes or other types of animals, education is the key. It will help you to know what to avoid and what won't hurt you, allowing you a pleasurable natural experience.

Some common rhymes about poison ivy:

1. "Leaves of three, let it be."
2. "Hairy vine, no friend of mine."
3. "Raggy rope, don't be a dope!" Poison ivy vines on trees have a furry "raggy" appearance.
4. "One, two, three? Don't touch me."
5. "Berries white, run in fright" and "Berries white, danger in sight."
6. "Longer middle stem, stay away from them." This refers to the middle leaflet having a notably longer stem than the two side leaflets.
7. "Red leaflets in the spring, it's a dangerous thing." This refers to the red appearance that new leaflets sometimes have in the spring.
8. "Side leaflets like mittens, will itch like the dickens." This refers to the appearance of some, but not all, poison ivy leaves, where each of the two side leaflets has a small notch that makes the leaflet look like a mitten with a "thumb."
9. "If butterflies land there, don't put your hand there." This refers to the fact that some butterflies land on poison ivy, since they are not affected, which provides them protection as their predators avoid eating the plant.
10. "If it's got hair, it won't be fair." This refers to the hair that can be on the stem and leaves of poison ivy.