



PHOTO CREDIT: Dr. William M. Johnson

We typically think of poison ivy as growing in wooded areas away from urban areas when in fact it's most commonly found in less remote areas: the edges of your backyard, the shoulder of a highway, and even on trunks of trees growing along walking paths in parks.

One topic I have yet to discuss in this column is poison ivy. Poison ivy is abundant in urban, suburban and rural landscapes in addition to parks and other areas. Gardeners often come into contact with poison ivy and many contract a bothersome rash as a result. It pays to be able to identify and avoid it.

Poison ivy contains urushiol oil and its potent stuff. Just one billionth of a gram is enough to cause a rash. Urushiol is also a very stable oil. Urushiol can remain stable on an axe handle or other tool for several years and still be able to cause a rash.

The rash (an allergic con-

tact dermatitis) can be caused by direct contact with urushiol by touching the plants or by indirect contact with the plant oil that may have contaminated a pet's fur, gardening tools, clothing, or other surfaces.

We typically think of this plant as lying deep in the woods, but in fact it's



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most commonly found in less remote areas: the edges of your backyard, the shoulder of a highway, even a sand dune on a beach or along walking paths in parks. This plant can snake up a tree, creep along a fence, sprout through the cracks of a sidewalk, and grow low as a shrub. This character is definitely a Jekyll and Hyde in the landscape.

**Recognizing Poison Ivy:** Poison ivy is a tall, climbing vine that drops its leaves (deciduous) in winter. As it climbs tree trunks, wood fences or other flat structures, the stem produces many small roots that cling to the surface. This is a good identifiable characteristic of the vine in case you can't easily see the leaves.

Poison ivy has a characteristic compound leaf consisting of three leaflets—hence the saying, “Leaves of three, let it be.” Mature leaves are 2 to 4 inches long and dull or glossy green with pointed tips.

New seedlings of poison ivy are easily overlooked. They may have a reddish tint to their foliage and will appear upright. As they get older they will begin to vine and grow up nearby shrubs or trees. It is easy to come into contact with young poison ivy seedlings when weeding flower beds, so you need to be observant.

**Controlling Poison Ivy:** In controlling poison ivy, one of the most important things to do is to periodically check your landscape carefully for seedlings or vines. Look for the three-leaflet leaves in out-of-the-

way areas, under shrubs, along back fences and by trees.

Three methods can be effective in eradicating poison ivy in landscapes.

The first is hand pulling or digging it out when the soil is moist; getting out as much of the roots as possible. Use long-gauntlet, rubber gloves available at local hardware stores or use dishwashing gloves when handling the vines and wear a long-sleeved shirt. Place the plants into a plastic bag, seal it (in consideration for trash collectors).

The second method is to carefully spray the foliage with a systemic herbicide. This is only possible when the spray will not get on the foliage of desirable plants. If needed, nearby desirable plants can be covered with plastic sheets or bags to protect them while you do the spraying. Be sure to wet the foliage of the poison ivy vine thoroughly with the herbicide spray.

Systemic herbicides are absorbed by the foliage and enter the plant's “circulatory system”, sending the material into the vine's roots and killing them as well. Glyphosate (Roundup, Eraser, Hi-Yield Killzall and other brands) or triclopyr (Brush-B-Gon, Brush Killer and other brands) are commonly recommended for poison ivy control. Once the vine dies it may be removed. The dead leaves still contain the rash-causing oil and

should be handled cautiously with gloves.

The third method of removal is for larger, established vines growing up in trees or intertwined in shrubs. Spraying the vine foliage is not practical in these situations because of the potential to injure desirable trees and surrounding landscape plants. Poison ivy control in sensitive areas can best be achieved by the cut-vine method.

Cut off the vine a few inches from the ground with loppers and immediately treat the surface of the freshly cut stump with undiluted triclopyr (Brush-B-Gon, Brush Killer, Greenlight Cut Vine and Stump Killer and other brands). The vine in the tree or shrub will die because it has no root system. The treated stump will die because the herbicide gets absorbed by the freshly cut surface and translocates to the roots. Applying the herbicide to the fresh cut is necessary because it prevents the stump from re-sprouting. This method is very effective and may be used any time of the year.

Getting poison ivy off your property will probably take repeated herbicide applications. Watch out for this unwelcome plant and be prompt and aggressive in your efforts to control it.

