



POISON IVY ITCH

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photos by Mike Blair

Whatever name you call it, poison ivy can ruin a day outdoors. But if you learn to identify its different plant forms and what to do if you're exposed, you can enjoy the Kansas outdoors itch-free.

Just mention the words "poison ivy," and some turn and head for the vehicle or back to the main trail. You are not alone if a bad experience with poison ivy has kept you from fishing, hunting, camping or otherwise enjoying the

outdoors. About 85 percent of the population is susceptible to poison ivy. Contracting the rash is a nasty experience, but there is hope for all but the highly allergic. You can take charge, learn more about poison ivy and how to avoid getting the rash.

Even if you are susceptible to poison ivy, you can learn to avoid it and enjoy the outdoors.

The common name poison ivy was apparently given by Captain John Smith. Smith wrote, "The poisoned weed is much in shape

like our English Ivy, but being but touched, causeth rednesse, itching, and lastly blisters, the which howsoever because for the time they are somewhat painfull, it hath got it selfe an ill name....." (Source: *The Complete works of Captain John Smith* edited by Philip L. Barbour, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1986, volume II, page 341)

Poison ivy is much better understood today. It, along with poison oak and poison sumac, is a member of the genus *Toxicodendron* in the Anacardiaceae or the sumac and cashew family. Mangos and pistachio are other members of this family of about 77 genera and 600 species. Most of the Anacardiaceae are tropical or subtropical trees, shrubs or vines. Sumac (*Rhus sp.*) and poison ivy, poison oak and



A sea of poison ivy can be an unschooled hiker's worst nightmare. It is important to learn to recognize the three-leaved plant in all its stages. Poison ivy can be a low-growing ground plant, a medium-sized shrub, or a thick vine that climbs through trees.

poison sumac (*Toxicodendron*) are the most often encountered members of the family in the United States. These two genera are related and used to be lumped together in the genus

Rhus, but *Rhus* has orange to red fruits and does not cause the rash.

All of the contiguous 48 states have some populations of poison ivy, poison oak or poison sumac. Nevada is the

only state where *Toxicodendron* is rare. Poison ivy and poison oak have spread and become more common with civilization.

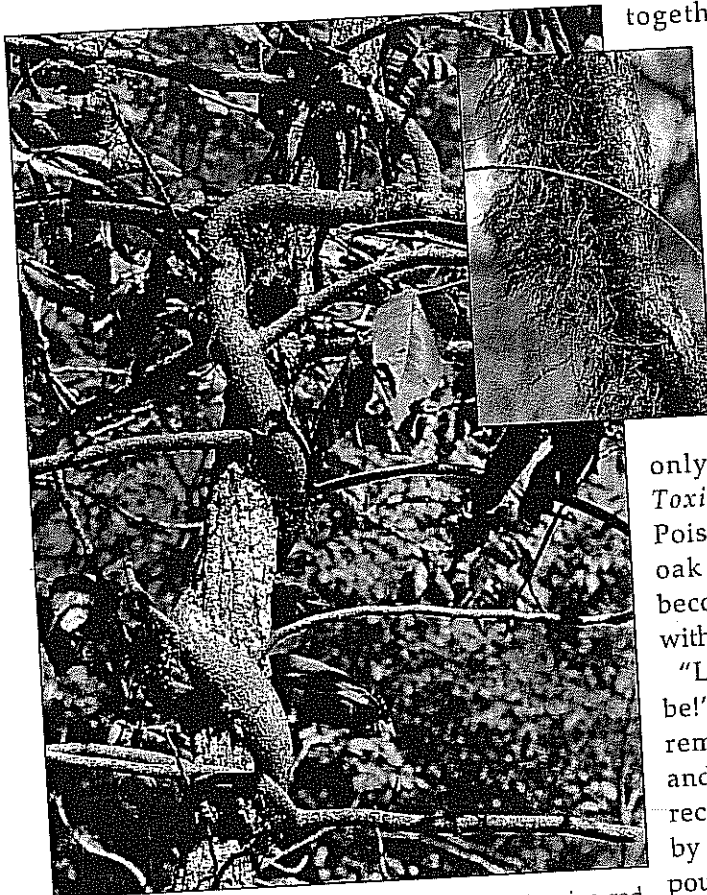
"Leaflets three, let it be!" is a good thing to remember. Poison ivy and poison oak can be recognized in the field by their alternate, compound leaves with three leaflets. Very young plants can have five

leaflets so it is not an absolute rule. Shape and size varies, but leaflets usually have toothed margins and a tinge of red at they join the stalk. The mature fruits are white or cream colored in all of the rash-causing plants. Poison sumac is a small tree with seven to 13 leaflets and is found only in wet, swampy areas in the eastern United States.

Poison ivy is found throughout Kansas. We have two poison ivy species in Kansas, *Toxicodendron radicans*, which is common in riparian habitats and forest margins in the eastern two thirds of the state and *Toxicodendron rydbergii* of western Kansas, which has smaller leaves with rounded leaflet tips. The latter is often mistakenly called poison oak.

There is a good side to poison ivy that we often overlook. It can be a spectacular fall color plant as it turns red early in the fall. It is even cultivated for its fall color in some places in Europe. The cream colored to greenish-white fruits are highly sought after by birds. Flickers, in particular, like them.

Poison ivy is a variable plant; it can exist as a trailing vine on the ground, as a weak shrub or as



Poison ivy is a beautiful fall plant in Kansas, turning red by late September. Sometimes, the vine grows aerial roots that give it a hairy appearance.

climbing vine that can climb to the tops of tall trees. This variability in appearance and in leaf size and shape makes poison ivy difficult to identify.

An estimated 35-45 million cases of poison ivy dermatitis occur each year, and more than 2 million of these require medical attention. Sensitivity (the degree of the problem poison ivy causes) varies considerably from individual to individual.

Poison ivy dermatitis is more common in the summer, but cases can occur in the fall and winter when contact is made with the plants when gathering firewood or hunting. Smoke from burning leaves and vines can cause serious problems in the lungs of sensitive individuals. In some populated areas of the eastern United States, it is against the law to burn poison ivy.

The rash is caused by a pale yellow oil called urushiol (you-ROO-she-ol). The oil is released from resin ducts in the stems, leaves and roots when they are injured.

Poison ivy is often cursed for the allergic reaction it causes in many humans. Even so, it is a useful food plant for wildlife. Birds such as the red-bellied woodpecker (above right,) white-tailed deer, and other animals eat its berries, which are produced in late summer and persist through mid-winter. The berries are cream-colored and grow in clusters. Animals which eat them help to spread poison ivy far and wide, since the seeds are passed through the digestive tract without harm. This is why the plant is common in fence-lines and under forest edges, where birds tend to perch.



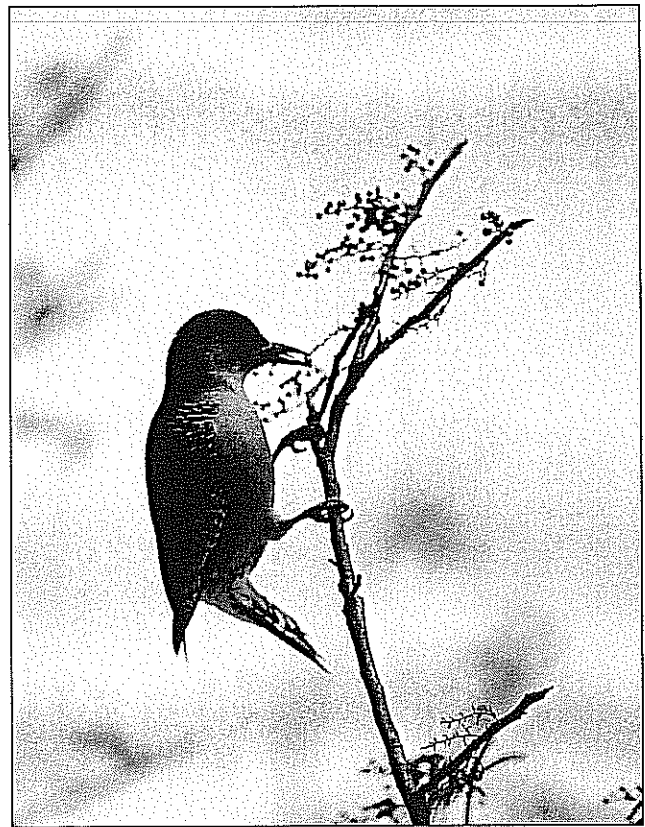
Urushiol is sticky, almost invisible, and easily spread by anything that comes into contact with damaged plant tissue.

Urushiol reacts with proteins in the skin of susceptible individuals and causes redness and swelling followed by itching and blisters. It takes 8 to 48 hours for the rash to appear.

Common Poison Ivy Myths

There are many myths surrounding poison ivy and the rash it causes. The most commonly held misconceptions are as follows:

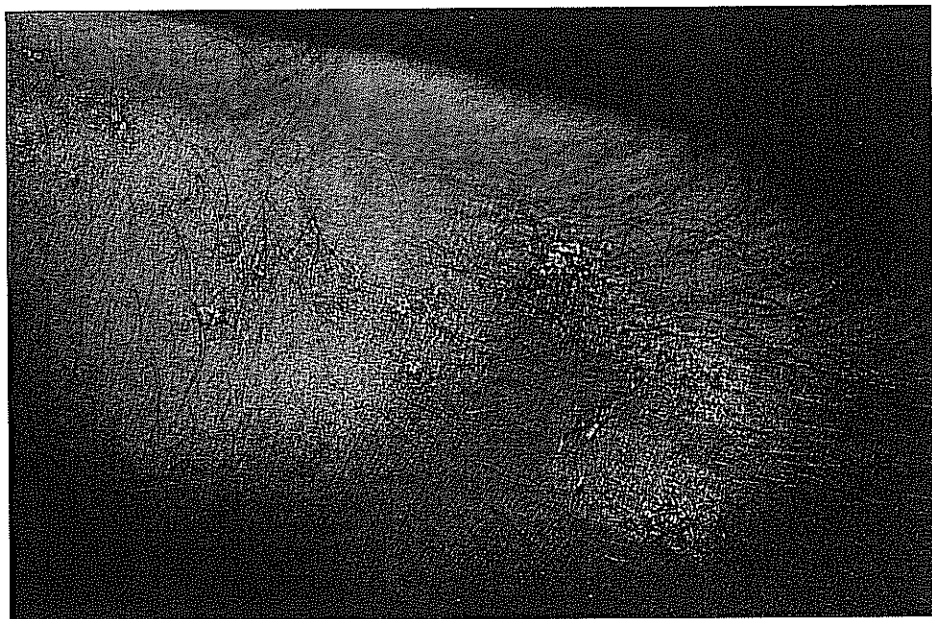
Poison ivy is contagious. No. Only contact with urushiol will spread the rash. The rash cannot be trans-



mitted from one person to another.

Scratching the blisters will spread the rash. No. These blisters do not contain urushiol. Scratching them may cause secondary infections, but it will not spread the rash. The rash often seems to spread, but it is always due to an earlier contact with urushiol. The rash will start in the areas where concentration of the oil was highest and seem to spread.

Once allergic to the plant you will always be allergic. No. A person's sensitivity to urushiol can change over time. Individuals who were very sensitive as children may not be sensitive as adults, and those who did not get a rash when they were young may get it at middle age.



Many myths surround poison ivy and how it spreads. A light case causes mild irritation and itching, while serious rashes can lead to large, watery blisters and open sores. Sensitive individuals may break out after contact with smoke from burning plants.

Dead poison ivy plants cannot cause the rash. Yes they can. The oil remains active and intact in dead stems and roots for several years. Handle dry, dead plants with the same care you would give live plants. Wear gloves and long-sleeved shirts when working with poison ivy.

Native Americans are not susceptible to poison ivy. That is false, too. One translation of a Native American name for poison ivy in the eastern United States is thought to be "The three fingered devil of the forest." Native American names for the plant give a vivid picture of what they thought of the plant.

POISON IVY PREVENTION

1. Learn to recognize poison ivy and minimize your contact with the plants. Even if you are not sensitive you should avoid direct contact with the plants whenever possible.

2. Wear long pants, long-sleeve shirts and gloves when you know that you are going to be in contact with poison ivy.

3. When you return home, spray your clothing, camping, hunting, fishing gear, and garden tools that have touched the plants with garden hose before bringing them into the home. Avoid handling items that have been in contact with poison ivy until they have been washed. Wash your hands as soon as possible if you touch anything that has touched the plants.

4. Avoid contact with pets that have roamed freely in places where there is poison ivy.

5. If you think you have had contact with poison ivy, oak or sumac

Native American Names for Poison Ivy

Tribe

Meaning

Chippewa

animikiibag (uh-NIM-ih-KEE-bug)

thunderleaf

Kaw

mahin-ppizhi

"Mahin" is grass or weeds and "ppizhi" is the verb "to be bad"

Omaha

xthiwathehi (xthee'-wah-thee-hee)

"plant that makes sores"

Winnebago

xa-a-win-shishik

"Xa-a-win" is grass and "shik" is "to be bad" and "shishik" is like saying bad, bad

wash the areas with cold running water or rubbing alcohol as soon as possible. Water or alcohol will remove the oil and keep it from spreading, if you can do this within five minutes. Soap and warm water are not necessary and may even help the oil spread and penetrate.

6. Try IvyBlock. IvyBlock is a lotion that contains a clay mineral that prevents urushiol from reaching and penetrating the skin. IvyBlock is applied like a sun screen, and it works.

TREATMENT FOR POISON IVY

The poison-ivy rash will develop within 8 to 48 hours after contact. It will start as a red, swollen streak and will begin to expand, itch and develop blisters. Mild rashes can be treated with cool showers and calamine lotion. Over-the-counter hydrocortisone creams and topical ointments may help very mild rashes, but most dermatologists consider these preparations too weak to be effective in most cases.

Moderate and severe poison ivy

rashes should get immediate medical attention. Prescription systemic hydrocortisone drugs can halt the reaction and dry up the rash if taken soon enough. There is no substitute for prompt medical attention. If you know that you have been exposed and have developed severe reactions in the past, consult with your doctor as soon as possible.

ERADICATING POISON IVY

Poison ivy is a long-lived, deep-rooted perennial, and that makes it hard to eradicate. Large vines and small shrubby plants can be cut at ground level and pulled out of the ground. Be sure to wear gloves and long sleeves and wash gloves, tools and clothes with water after use.

Clipped and dug up plants will regrow from the roots and can be sprayed or brushed carefully with glyphosate herbicide (Roundup or Ortho's). Glyphosate is a non-selective, translocated herbicide. It should be applied to the new shoots that will soon emerge from the base of the old plants. It is most effective on actively-growing plants in the

late spring or early summer.

Another herbicide that may be used is triclopyr (Ortho's Brush-B-Gon). Care must be taken to treat only the poison ivy plants and as with all herbicides, read the label and apply only as directed.

Complete eradication of poison ivy is difficult, and it may take several treatments to kill plants. Remember that the dead stems and roots can still give you the rash. Poison ivy seeds can continue to germinate for several years in places where mature plants have grown for any length of time.

Learn to recognize poison ivy in all of its forms. And when you know how the rash is transmitted and spreads, you will reduce your chances of getting a nasty rash and can enjoy the outdoors with those who are lucky to be immune. Just remember: Leaflets three let it be! ♡

