

# GUIDE

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## Poison Ivy, Identification, and Control

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Although poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*) is easily identified and should be avoided, countless individuals experience a painful introduction to the species. A mere touch of the foliage can result in a blotching of the skin and burning water blisters, which cause the flesh beneath to swell and throb with intense pain. Symptoms may become evident within a short time after exposure, or it may take a few days. Fortunately, such an attack leaves no scars, and general health is not impaired.

All parts of the plant, including stem and roots, contain and secrete a nonvolatile oil (oleo resin) that is insoluble in water. It is this secretion that is irritating to the skin. Consequently, washing with water alone after contact merely spreads the affected area and increases the discomfort. However, washing with a strong alkali soap such as yellow laundry or naphtha will relieve the discomfort. Alcohol will dissolve and remove the oily substance from the skin and if applied soon enough will prevent irritation. Burning poison ivy after it has been cut or grubbed out and dried can be hazardous because smoke can cause the same symptoms. Inhaling smoke can result in serious consequences.

The poison ivy plant can be a low-growing shrub or a vine that climbs to the top of the tallest tree. See figure 1.

Aerial rootlets enable the vine to attach itself to whatever it may be growing on. Leaves are compound with three leaflets which may have smooth, scalloped, or irregularly toothed margins. See figure 2.

The leaf surface may or may not have an oily appearance. The fruit is greenish-white, smooth with a waxy appearance, and it grows in clusters the size of small currents. Each fruit (berry) contains a single



Figure 1. Poison ivy plant characteristics. Courtesy of Thornton, Harrington and Zimdahl, Colorado Experiment Station.

seed. Birds and other wildlife feed on the berries and consequently spread the poison ivy in their droppings.

Although poison ivy is easily identified, there are other weedy species that have somewhat similar characteristics. Fragrant Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) with three leaflets palmately arranged is commonly confused with poison ivy. However, this species differs in that both fruit and leaves may be pubescent (hairy). The degree of pubescence varies because there are three subspecies with wide distribution in the state.

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*), also called woodbine, is found throughout Missouri. An aggressive vine, it grows to the top of the tallest tree. It can be readily identified and distinguished from poison ivy by the five leaflets making up the compound leaf. Neither Virginia creeper nor fragrant sumac contain toxic substances that irritate the skin.

Poison ivy can be found almost anywhere. It most commonly grows along fence rows, roadside areas, and along the edge of wooded tracts. However, it may

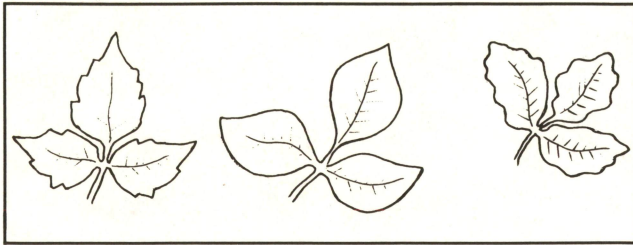


Figure 2. Poison ivy leaf characteristics.

also be found around the home in shrubbery, flower beds, and along lot boundaries. Since it's inconspicuous during the growing season, the home owner may be unaware of its presence. However, the vivid fall color makes poison ivy a tempting addition to winter bouquets.

The names *poison ivy* and *poison oak* are frequently used interchangeably or to describe other related species. Poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*) is the predominant species found throughout Missouri. Poison oak (*Rhus*

*toxicodendron*), a low-growing, non-climbing shrub, is found in a few counties in extreme southern Missouri. Both species are irritant plants and should be treated with respect.

Several herbicides can be used to eradicate poison ivy. Amino triazole sold under the brand names Amitrol-T, Amino triazole 90 and Weedazol is highly effective and safe to use. Available as a liquid or wettable powder, it should be applied during periods of rapid plant growth to insure maximum kill. Thorough vegetative coverage is essential. The herbicides Roundup and Ammonium sulfamate are also effective in eradicating the pest. A combination of Banvel and 2,4-D can be used to advantage where herbicide drift is not a factor. However, 2,4-D should not be applied in locations where other sensitive species grow in close proximity to poison ivy. Read and understand instructions on the herbicide label before making applications.