

Identifying and Controlling Poison Ivy

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

One thing that is guaranteed with the early warm weather and now all of this rain, is that the poison ivy is growing like gangbusters. If you are one of the two out of every three people that is sensitive to poison ivy, then that is something that you don't want to hear. But by taking the time to learn to identify it and then how to effectively control it in your yard, you can minimize the risk of needing "an ocean of calamine lotion" to deal with your discomfort.

Poison ivy is extremely variable in appearance. It can be a vine climbing up a tree, it can be a low spreading ground cover in the grass and it can be a free standing shrub just like wild plum. It's all poison ivy; we don't have poison sumac or poison oak in Kansas. The leaves can be big or small, light green or dark green, the leaves can be shiny or dull.

What doesn't change is that it has a compound leaf made up of three leaflets. Remember the adage, "Leaves of three, let it be!" There are a few other plants that may have three leaflets so just steer clear anyway. Virginia creeper, that is often growing around poison ivy also has a compound leaf but most of it's leaves will have five leaflets. If you see a vine growing up a tree that looks like a real hairy rope, that's poison ivy. And late in the summer poison ivy has white berries that the birds really love to eat and then they spread seeds everywhere.

Humans are about the only creature that seems to be allergic to poison ivy. It doesn't bother pets, but they can carry the nasty rash causing oil into the house on their fur. About two thirds of the population will be allergic to poison ivy and that can change over time. You may not have been bothered last year, but this year you just blossom out! As I indicated, there is an oil in the sap that causes the irritation and reaction. The oil is very stable and not very water soluble. If you've been exposed to poison ivy, wash your skin immediately with lots of COLD water. Warm water just helps the oil penetrate your skin! If you start to develop an extreme rash, go see your doctor.

The best approach to dealing with poison ivy is to learn to recognize it and avoid it. It often grows much further out into grass than homeowners realize, so steer a wide path with lawn mowers and especially line trimmers. You have to come in contact with the sap of the plant to develop a reaction, you can not get it through vapors in the air. But the oil in the sap is very stable and does not go away when the plant is dead, even after several years.

Other than pulling up seedlings, herbicides are about the only way to control it. Just cutting it off at the ground will not kill it. The plant will re-sprout and continue growing. Products labeled as poison ivy killer are effective, but use them carefully as they will kill desirable plants as well. Most of them are safe to use in grassy areas but apply when it is cool and calm to avoid drift and overspray from landing on desirable plants. You can also use glyphosate (Roundup) but remember that it will kill anything green that it is sprayed on. Large vines climbing trees are best dealt with by carefully cutting out a section of the vine and then treating the stump with a stump and brush killer or concentrated glyphosate.

A bad poison ivy rash is never a fun thing and can even land some people in the hospital. Learn to identify it and control it around your yard to reduce the risk. For more information about poison ivy, what it looks like and how to control it, stop by the Extension Office and pick up our bulletin on poison ivy.