

It's Poison Ivy Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

One of the staff at the Extension Office came down with a case of poison ivy a couple of weeks ago. While I really felt bad for them, it's hard for me to relate as I've never had a case of poison ivy. Therein lies one of the challenges and enigmas of poison ivy.

The poison ivy rash that some people get is an allergic reaction to a very stable oil that is in the sap and all parts of the plant. At any given time about two thirds of the population is allergic to it. While I've never been allergic to it, that could change at any given moment like all allergies. To compound the issue, humans are apparently the only species that is allergic to poison ivy. Birds eat the berries, deer eat the leaves, cats and dogs run through it all the time and none of these species react to it. But if you are sensitive, and your dog runs through it and then comes back and rubs up against you, it has likely carried the oil right back to you and you will then break out!

Poison ivy is often overlooked by homeowners. They may think they know what poison ivy looks like but then come across a different presentation than they expect, and oops, you're back to calamine lotion time! To clarify one misconception, all we have around here is poison ivy. We do not have poison sumac; we do not have poison oak. However, poison ivy has a great deal of genetic variation and is very adaptable. It can be a low growing ground cover, a free standing shrub or a vine growing up a tree. But it is all poison ivy.

There can be a great deal of variation in the leaf shape, color, size, even whether it is glossy or dull looking. But the one feature that doesn't change is "leaves of three". Technically they are leaflets, but they easily look like leaves. So remember the old adage, "leaves of three, let it be." Poison ivy can often be growing intermixed with other plants including another native vine, Virginia creeper. Virginia creeper will usually have 5 leaflets making up it's leaf so they are quite easy to differentiate.

Contrary to what some people claim, you have to come into physical contact with the sap of the plant to develop a reaction. The oil does not volatilize into a gas and drift through the air. If you are using a lawn mower or line trimmer, you can launch tiny droplets of the sap into the air that may blow back on to you. If you are burning the vine, small droplets of the oil can become attached to smoke particles and land on your skin or inhaled into your lungs. This can be a very serious situation so you need to be careful of this. The oil can also be transferred onto pets, clothing, tools, even steering wheels of cars to be contacted by a sensitive person later.

If you think you have been exposed to poison ivy you want to wash down with lots and lots of cold water. The oil is only slightly soluble in water. Hot water allows it to just more easily spread over the skin and penetrate the skin. Cold water keeps the oil on top of the skin where it can be washed off. Do not use solvents, bleach or other products like that; just lots and lots of cold water.

If you find poison ivy in your yard, products such as glyphosate and poison ivy killers can be used to control it. Use the with caution and follow label directions as these herbicides can also damage or kill desirable plants as well. If you find a suspicious plant but aren't sure if it is poison ivy or not, don't bring it in to me, just take a photo with your phone and email it to me at cotte@ksu.edu or bring the photo in to my office! For more information, pick up our poison ivy bulletin at the Extension Office.