

It's Going to Take an Ocean, of Calamine Lotion...

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Poison ivy is a native perennial deep rooted woody plant. Depending on the setting and environment it may be a low growing spreading ground cover, it can be a vine growing tens of feet up into a tree, or it can be a free standing shrub looking like wild plums growing in a fence row. It is all poison ivy, we have no poison sumac in Kansas and poison oak, if we even have it at all in the state, is limited to a very small region of extreme southeast Kansas.

Poison ivy is well adapted to periodic droughts which has likely given it a definite advantage this year allowing it to spread a little more than is normal. It is a fairly valuable wildlife plant. Deer routinely browse on the leaves. Birds eat the berries readily throughout the summer and fall. Wildlife find shelter under it's leaves. Dogs and cats roll around in it regularly. Unfortunately, the sap contains an oily compound called urushiol. While all other creatures are apparently unaffected by this compound, if sensitive humans get it on their skin they will break out with a rash, sometimes a horrible rash. A family pet may go rolling around on it and then carry the oil on their fur back to their owners!

Poison ivy is very easily identified and routinely mis-identified or not-identified! The leaves can be big or small, toothed or smooth edged, light green, dark green, glossy surface or matte surface. Poison ivy has what is known as a compound leaf that is made up of three leaflets. This three leaf appearance is consistent across all forms of growth. It also leads to two helpful sayings: "leaves of three, let it be" or leaves of three, don't touch me." While there are a few other plants that can have a similar three leaflet pattern it's probably best to be safe than sorry. If you find a vine with five leaflets, that is Virginia creeper, another native vine that is not a problem.

You have to get the sap on your skin to react. While the oily residue can be carried on smoke particles it does not have vapors that can get you without physical contact of the plant or the sap. What usually happens is that homeowners don't realize how far out the plant is growing and make contact with it. If you suspect that you have come into contact with poison ivy the best initial step is to shower or bathe with lots of cold water. Urushiol is only slightly soluble in water. Using hot water and soap only succeeds in spreading the oil over more skin area to cause reactions. Cold water will wash it off and keep it from spreading out. The oil is very stable and can stay reactive for years. Wash clothes after exposure and clean off the handles and blades of gardening tools.

It can be controlled with any of the products sold as poison ivy killers. The active ingredient in these is often triclopyr. Care must be taken as triclopyr can damage any woody plant so be careful treating around desirable plants. You can also use glyphosate (Round-up, Kleen-up and others) but this is non-selective and will kill or damage everything it comes in contact with. If you have vines growing up a tree it often looks like a very fuzzy rope. To control it, remove a section of the vine and then treat the freshly cut surface with glyphosate or triclopyr concentrate applied with a small paint brush.

Poison ivy is everywhere and doing very well this year. The best approach is to simply learn to ID it and avoid contact. Control it with appropriate herbicides in areas close to where you and your family are. If you aren't sure if something is poison ivy, bring me a photo of it, but NOT the plant itself!