

POISON IVY

An article written by Nancy DuBrule-Clemente for the
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An Unexpected Gift from the Garden

It was a glorious early spring weekend in Vermont and I escaped from my busy garden center for a few days of camping. I set up my tent in a field of tall grass, right next to a lovely pond. I read, I slept, I built a campfire, and wandered around barefoot. All was right with the world. On the four hour drive home, I started to feel a bit itchy. Not just on my arms, but in cracks and crevices all over my body. By the next day, rashes had broken out everywhere. I came to the full realization that Mother Nature had given me an unexpected gift as a result of my camping adventure: a nasty case of poison ivy. As I suffered and scratched my way through countless spring festivals and garden talks, I came to realize the enormity of misinformation about this plant circulating amongst my customers, coworkers, friends, and family. Let's start out this growing season by setting the record straight.

First of all, poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is a native plant that is food to birds and many animals. (I say this in case you were wondering WHY does it exist and what good is it?) It can take many forms; most people think of it as a vine rambling up trees. I got it this time from a ground cover vine weaving its way through grass and weeds. It didn't have any leaves at all, it was simply bare stems, practically undetectable unless you were really looking. I know of an old fence post that is covered with vines; they culminate at the top in a mass of branches and the effect is that of a poison ivy tree. The sides of the highway are covered in poison ivy vines intermingled with native orange butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). I have given the "poison ivy tour" to show innocent gardeners suffering from the rash what forms it can take and they have always expressed amazement at the chameleon quality of this plant.

Second, you get the rash from poison ivy by coming in contact with *urushiol*. According to the definitive reference on this plant, Nature's Revenge by Susan Hauser, "urushiol flows within the canals in the leaves, stems, roots, and skin of the berries." This oil has a depressingly long life. If you walk through a patch of poison ivy, put your work boots away for the winter, and then put them back on in the spring, the oil that is most likely still clinging to your boots can still infect you! It can last for many years, leaving its residue on tool handles, gardening jackets, and all sorts of other traps-in-waiting. If you plant naturalizing daffodil bulbs amongst the BARE STEMS of poison ivy; the urushiol on those stems will give you the rash, even in December! If you don't realize you've been exposed, this oil can cling to your trowel and shovel handle, pruning shears and their holster, and the bucket that you carried the organic soil amendments in.

Third, you cannot get poison ivy by either: a. walking by it or by scratching the blisters. Once you have it, it is NOT systemic within your body. If it continues to show up over a few days or a week on parts of your body which were not exposed to the plant or any of its parts, it is because you are either getting reinfected from the oil which could be present somewhere in your world OR the oil was diluted by your sweat and made it's way to hidden cracks and crevices in your body.

To disinfect myself once I realize I have been exposed, I always carry the following arsenal in my car: isopropyl alcohol, Fels Naptha brown soap, disposable surgical gloves, and Tecnu brand poison ivy wash. Realizing how easy it is to spread the urushiol, I first wash my skin with Tecnu, carefully following the directions and applying it to dry skin and rubbing it in for two minutes before washing off with water. I then clean my skin with rubbing alcohol. I then wash all exposed body parts with the brown soap for good measure.

As an organic land care practitioner, I would never use Roundup or any other toxic chemicals not allowed by the NOFA standards. To control poison ivy, I use a few methods. For small amounts, I boil up a kettle of water and pour it on the roots. NEVER burn poison ivy or use a flame weeder on poison ivy as you can get the rash in your lungs, a common problem for firefighters. An organic herbicide such as acid based Burnout will work on the leaves of young plants, but is not systemic and will not kill the roots. If I cut a large vine from a tree, I will fold a thick garbage bag in quarters, pin it down over the stub that I cut, and bury it with mulch. Any cutting tools will then have urushiol on them. For larger areas, I open up large cardboard boxes, plop them down on the plants, and bury the cardboard with 2-4" of organic mulch- leaves, shredded bark, anything will do. If any poison ivy finds its way into the light, I smother it again. When poison ivy is growing within landscape beds, I am forced to pull it out. First, I suit up with tall rubber boots, a long sleeve work shirt, surgical gloves on my hands, and Blulette thick rubber gloves over them. I have a heavy duty garbage bag or two at the ready. I work carefully and deliberately, pulling the vines and placing them in the garbage bags. If I have to cut any vines, I know that my pruning shears, the holster that holds it, and the belt that holds the holster will be contaminated with urushiol. If I dig it out, the handle of the shovel gets contaminated. I work slowly and deliberately, with absolute awareness of how easy it is for this oil to spread and great respect for its power to hurt me. If my face itches (which it ALWAYS does at this point), I don't scratch it! When done, I tie up the garbage bag and discard it. If I am on the crew, I label this bag so everyone knows it is "P.I." as we call it. I then wash my rubber gloves while they are still on my hands with Tecnu as described above, following up with rubbing alcohol. I remove them and keeping the surgical gloves on, I wipe down my rubber boots, my holster, my belt, my pruning shears, and my shovel handle with rubbing alcohol using rags that I will later discard or paper towels. I then remove my boots. I wash my arms and hands thoroughly with Tecnu, followed by rubbing alcohol. We follow this regimen "disinfecting" ourselves. Urushiol is tricky stuff. If you take off your hat, open the truck door, touch anything, clean it well!

What I didn't realize, and learned by checking out a comprehensive poison ivy website (www.poisonivy.aesir.com) is that once I have washed the oil off with the products that truly do dilute the oil, the protective coating on my skin has been temporarily destroyed and that I should not return to the infested area as I am much more susceptible to the oil penetrating. This and hundreds of other fascinating facts can be found both on the website and in the book. However, I must warn you to NEVER read about this plant when you have the rash; I did that and it was NOT a pleasant experience!

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