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## IN YOUR GARDEN

### POISON IVY

"Careful that's Poison Ivy. Or is it?" An often heard phrase at this time of the year, when so many of us are out enjoying the forests, parks or even our own back yards. It is wise to know the difference between Poison Ivy and the harmless look-a-likes, advises Donna Peterson Detrick, Summer Horticulturist in Cook County.

Actually Poison Ivy is not an Ivy at all. It is a perennial plant which may vine on fences, trees or walls, may spread along the ground; or may appear as an erect shrub. The appearance of the leaves is variable as well. They may have smoothed, toothed, or lobed edges, and the leaf length may vary from 2 to 4 inches. It's not unusual to find different appearing leaves on the same plant. But three leaflets to the compound leaf will always remain constant.

Clusters of small, greenish-white flowers appear in the spring and by the end of the summer waxy, white berries about 1/8 or 1/4 inch in diameter form. These berries have distinct lines marking the outer surface, resembling a peeled orange.

There are some plants which are easily mistaken for Poison Ivy. Virginia creeper is frequently mistaken, but it has five leaflets to its leaf and blue berries. Remember despite the size and variations of the poison ivy leaflets, there will always be three of them.

Usually, but not always, poisoning is caused by contact with some part of a bruised plant. Very small quantities of the poisonous substance called urushiol can cause severe inflammation. This non-volatile phenolic substance is found in all parts of the plant including roots and berries. The danger of poison ivy is greatest in the spring and summer when the sap is flowing but it is possible to be poisoned in fall and winter too. The toxin is easily transferred from one object to another so that clothing, tools, and animals are capable of poisoning people. The first symptoms, itching and burning, may develop in a few hours or several days after contamination.

Often the easiest and safest method of controlling poison ivy is with herbicides. Be careful not to let the spray drift onto desirable plants or they may be killed as well. It is always best to spray any herbicide on a still day (or in the early morning) when the wind won't carry the chemical. In places where desirable plants may be hurt by the spray, try using a long-handled brush or wick applicator.

Best results occur when the poison ivy is treated in late spring or early summer after the leaves have fully expanded. Don't attempt to destroy poison ivy after the leaves have turned yellow.

Two similar chemicals which are particularly effective are amitrole (dry material) and amitrole-T (liquid), available under different trade names. Use two tablespoons of amitrole-T in one gallon of water, and spray all leaves thoroughly until wet. Another treatment may be required next year.

Do not try to remove the plants after treatment. They will still contain the toxins for several years. Burning the poison ivy is dangerous as well since the toxins will be released into the air and may poison people for many miles.

Though the plant may have many appearances just remember the old saying, "Leaflets three, let it be" and you should not have problems.

**James A. Fizzell, Sr. Extension Adviser  
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