

# Poison Ivy Fact Sheet

Poison ivy is probably the most common shrub associated with Iowa's woodlands. It is found throughout the state. It is safe to say that poison ivy is well known but not a very understood shrub. The plant is often found as three more or less distinct forms: a small under-story plant, a free standing shrub, up to 6-8 feet tall, and as a vine, occasionally 2-4 inches in diameter. The leaves are pinnately compound with three leaflets-the middle leaflet on a stalk and the others are mostly without stalks. The leaves are glossy green in the summer, turning bright red in autumn. The vines form hairy tendrils as they grow up a tree. As the vine grows, it produces branches, which are at a noticeable right angle to the main stem of the vine. Winter buds are stalked, brownish-yellow in color, and about ¼ inch long. The fruit is a white to yellow drupe, about 3/16 of an inch in diameter. It reproduces from root sprouts, from rhizomes or underground stems, from climbing vines, and from the seeds.

Poison ivy is a very important plant for wildlife. Many birds utilize the persistent fruit during the winter and browsers, such as rabbit and deer will utilize the twigs during the winter months.

Poison ivy is famous or infamous for its pale yellow oil, called urushiol. This oil is present in all parts of the plant-leaves, stem, roots, and fruit. In addition, urushiol is very persistent in the environment and may last for many years before breaking down. In fact, if poison ivy plant parts are burned, the urushiol is carried in the particles of soot, smoke and dust. As the urushiol is absorbed through the skin, the metabolites bind with the skin proteins and the immune system attacks these foreign structures resulting in the allergic reaction of itching, inflammation and blistering of the skin. These symptoms may appear in 2-14 days after exposure. What determines how soon a person reacts after exposure is how sensitive he or she is to the plant and the number of previous times the person has been exposed to it.

The best way to avoid getting "poison ivy" is to not get urushiol on your skin. Know what the plant looks like and avoid it. If you can't avoid it, wear protective clothing. Wash anything that may have come in contact with the plant before it touches your skin, including your dog. Never burn poison ivy because of possible contamination of the mucus membranes, which is extremely serious. There are also barrier creams that are commercially available. If you think you've been exposed, wash the area as soon as possible, preferably within an hour after exposure, with lots of cool running water. A lake or a river works well. Don't use soap unless it contains no oils (oil will cause the urushiol to spread).

**It is important to note that poison ivy does not all look alike. Be cautious of any plants fitting the general description and always take precautions to avoid being exposed to the plant.**



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