

A HOME & GARDEN Guide

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The best way to deal with poison ivy is to learn how to identify it so it can be avoided.

Poison ivy unfriendly plant

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The rash of poison ivy *Toxicodendron radicans* (and its oozing fluid) itself is not contagious; poison ivy cannot be spread by the rash alone. One must come in contact with the urushiol oil in the plant in order to develop the rash.

Often the rash is manifested in straight lines, a result of brushing against the plant in passing. The rash becomes more or less severe depending on the amount of urushiol that came in contact with the skin. Since the oil residue can linger for months, poison ivy can be spread by articles of clothing; for example, people may re-infect themselves by handling the same shoe worn while walking through the plant weeks before.

Poison ivy can also be spread

by animals; petting a dog after it has run through a patch of the plant is a frequent way of contacting it. The human skin is the only surface that is affected by poison ivy.

Animals, such as pigs, cattle, horses, goats, and sheep eat it without any problems. However, if a person should eat a leaf of poison ivy, the normal level of immunity could be exceeded; internal poison ivy contact has been known to be fatal.

The poison may also enter the body by inhaling smoke from burning the plant, as tiny droplets of urushiol may be present on the particles of dust and ash in the smoke.

Until fairly recently, there was little way of hastening the departure of the disease; most medicines used on the skin merely

served to help dry the blisters or relieve itching. Now, steroid/cortisone derivatives will quickly clear up the problem, but should only be administered by a doctor.

The best way to deal with poison ivy is to learn how to identify it so it can be avoided. With poison ivy, an ounce of prevention is really worth a pound of cure. Heeding the old adage, "leaflets of three, let it be," is a good way to avoid the unfriendly plant.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identification, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 to arrange a tour of the herbarium or for more information about this article.

Garden Tales