

POISON IVY



HABITAT

Western poison ivy occurs essentially statewide and is common everywhere except the northern tier of counties. Although it is primarily a forest species, it is adapted to a remarkably wide range of ecological conditions. It occurs in the interior of mature hardwood forests but also in young successional forests, forest ecotones, and brushy thickets. It is also found in native prairies (where fire has been suppressed), sand dunes, talus, rock fields, and floodplains. It seems to be absent only from permanently wet habitats.

POPULATION

Western poison ivy often forms colonies, sometimes 20 feet or more across. They grow quickly and can spread aggressively, especially in damaged habitats. This is certainly the case on roadsides, ditch banks, utility rights-of-way, and old fields. It is also notoriously adept at encroaching into mowed lawns from adjacent woods.

WHAT IS POISON IVY?

Not a true ivy plant, western poison ivy is well known for producing a skin irritant. Western poison ivy is a small, non-climbing shrub usually about knee high, with a single stem and only a few stubby branches or no branches at all. Its leaves can be relatively large but always with three leaflets. The Virginia creeper and woodbine types are similar but have 5 leaflets instead of 3. The jack-in-the-pulpit and the trilliums types have 3 leaflets, but they have non-woody stems.

ABOUT THE POISON

The sap contains a toxic oily compound (3-n-pentadecyl-catechol) that is found in the leaves, flowers, stems, and roots. If any portion of the plant is bruised or broken, the poison may exude onto the surface, which is how people typically come in contact with it. It is initially a clear liquid, but it turns into a black gummy substance within a few hours and can remain toxic for an indefinite period, reportedly for several hundred years. Contact may be direct between plant and bare skin, or the poison may travel on the fur of a dog, camping equipment, clothing, or other intermediary. The compound is not volatile, so it is not normally transmitted through the air, although it can be carried as droplets on particles of ash in the smoke of burning plants.

