

Adopt-a-River



Plants to respect: how to avoid the itch

Have any outdoor adventures left you feeling itchy? Though summer river and lake shoreline cleanups are great fun, they also can be troublesome for the unprepared because of the presence of plants that demand respect. Thorns and briars may be a hazard, but their scratches can be felt instantly, making them easy to avoid. This is not true with the delayed itching of poison ivy and nettles. The best way to prevent the discomforts of nettles and poison ivy is to recognize and avoid them. The following information is designed to assist you and your cleanup crew in this effort.

Stinging Nettle and Wood Nettle

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) and wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*) are both native North American plants. Both produce a brief, but uncomfortable stinging sensation when they come into contact with your skin. The stems and leaves of these plants are covered with long stinging hairs. At the slightest touch, the hairs break off. The sharp points of these fine hairs penetrate the skin, releasing the sap of the plant, which inflames the skin. The irritation lasts for only a short time. Both of these nettles are similar in that they grow



2-7 feet tall, with slender, rigid stems and coarsely toothed leaves.



The **wood nettle** grows in dense stands in rich, deeply shaded, moist woodlands or in the shade of overhanging trees along streams or lakes. In contrast, the **stinging nettle** is common on higher ground in full sunlight. It thrives in barnyards, thickets, and roadsides. The plants can be distinguished by the difference in their leaf arrangements. Wood nettle has alternate leaves, and stinging nettle has opposite leaves.

The best known folk remedy advises crushing the leaves and stems of jewel weed and rubbing this on the irritated skin. In damp lowlands jewel weed and nettles frequently grow close to each other, so this remedy can be easily tried. Try to avoid itching the affected area as this probably increases the stinging sensation as the skin irritant is spread around.

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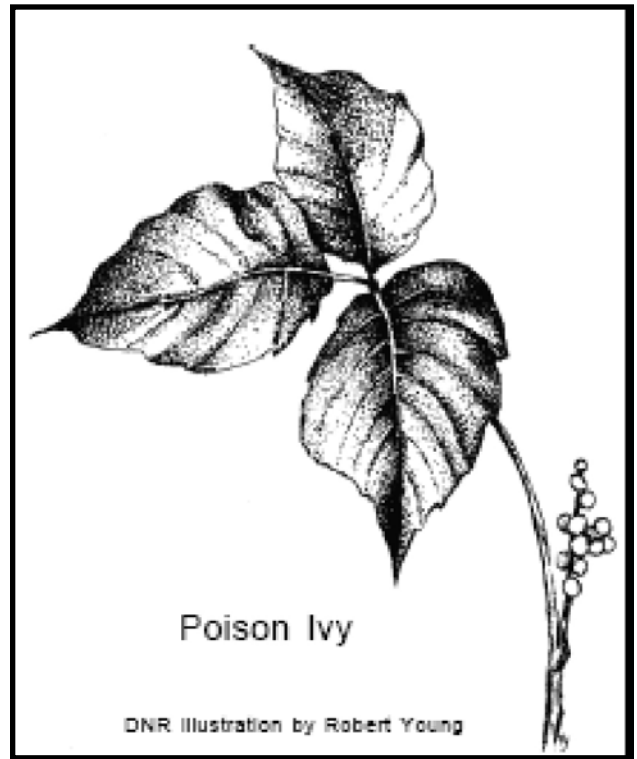
Poison Ivy

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans* and *T. rydbergii*) can appear where you least expect it, it grows as a small plant, a low shrub, and as a vine. In Minnesota, the plant tends to grow as a one-foot tall shrub. In either form the plant is characterized by having groups of three leaves. Hence the saying, “Leaves of three, let it be!” The leaves are each 2 to 4 inches long, and are pointed at the tip, with the middle leaf stem slightly longer than the other two. In midsummer, inconspicuous yellow green flowers can be found in compact clusters. Shortly after flowering, hard white-yellow berries appear and may last over winter and into spring, remaining on the woody stalk of the perennial plant. The leaves change from bright green in the spring and summer to a deep red or reddish yellow in the fall.

Poison ivy can be found in many places. It favors wooded uplands, but can be found in flood plains, bottom lands, pastures and fence rows. The sap that travels in the resin ducts of its roots, stems, leaves, flowers and fruits contains urushiol, a mixture of several powerful allergens. The sap ducts do not open to the surface of the leaf. So, the plant has to be broken or crushed before the rash-inducing oils can seep to the surface. Sometimes leaf damage is caused by grazing insects, so even if the plant does not look like it has been crushed, the sap may have already been released.

Contact with broken or crushed foliage and stalks of the plant or with clothing, tools, or pets that have touched the plant can result in a red, itchy rash. The oils can penetrate and adhere to the skin in anywhere from 10 to 90 minutes, although the rash will not become apparent until several hours to days later. Immediately washing exposed skin with strong soap and water may prevent the oil from penetrating and thus prevent a rash from developing. Washing after the oils have bound to the skin won't prevent a reaction, but it will prevent a transfer of the extra oil to other parts of the body. If you are doing a shoreline cleanup of an area with poison ivy, the most important measure you can take is to avoid stepping on or brushing against the plant. It also helps to wear protective clothing, such as jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Be sure to shower (wash with soap), and wash your clothes upon returning home. Taking these precautions will help minimize the extent of your exposure, and duration of reaction.

If you do break out into a rash, several things can be done to relieve the itching and discomfort. Home remedies such as wet compresses and soaking in cool water may relieve the itching for mild cases. Stirring a bit of salt or baking soda into a bath of water may help dry blisters. For more severe cases a variety of over-the-counter creams and lotions, such as calamine lotion, will relieve itching and dry the blisters. Antihistamines may also help. If the rashes and irritation fail to respond to these over-the-counter medications, or if you suspect that you have inhaled smoke from a fire containing poison ivy, professional medical attention is advised.



*Illustrations from: Gleason, Henry A. The New Briton and Brown Illustrated Flora of the Northwestern United States and Adjacent Canada, Volume 2. New York: The New York Botanical Gardens, Hafner Press, 1952.

Sources:

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