



Poison ivy is your enemy

Now experts say the plants could grow more potent

A recent prediction from researchers at Duke University and Harvard no doubt produced shivers of horror in gardeners, hikers and campers everywhere. The dire warning: Global warming might make poison ivy, the rash-inducing plant, grow bigger and more potent.

As many know all too well, "it would be hard for it to get much worse," says Joseph Fowler, a Louisville dermatologist.

As it is, 70% to 80% of people are allergic to urushiol (you-roo-shee-ol), the oily substance found in poison ivy and its cousins, poison oak and poison sumac.

For the most sensitive, the smallest brush of a leaf against an unprotected wrist can produce an oozing, blistering, maddeningly itchy rash that lasts for weeks.

But at least for now, until the mutant, giant vines arrive, there are ways to avoid the horror.

First, stay away from the plants — if you can. They are almost everywhere and come in many forms. Poison ivy often is a vine with serrated "leaves of three." But the leaflets also can come in clusters of five, and similar poison oak can grow as a bush, while poison sumac can be a small tree or shrub with up to 13 staggered leaflets.

One sure clue: A broken leaf or stem will be covered with black sap.

Even if you don't see the plants in the woods or in an unfamiliar garden



Illustrations by Alejandro Gonzalez, USA TODAY

Take the quiz

Can you get a poison ivy rash by . . .

1. Walking near a plant without touching it?
2. Being near burning plants?
3. Touching someone else's oozing rash or scratching a rash elsewhere on your own body?
4. Touching a pet with sap on its fur?
5. Touching clothes or garden tools that touched the plants?

Answers: 1, No; 2, Yes; 3, No; 4, Yes; 5, Yes.

patch, assume they are there, suggests Bruce Brod, a dermatologist in Lancaster, Pa.

He suggests that sensitive gardeners wear long sleeves and pants and use "heavy-duty" vinyl gloves.

Ivy Block, a drugstore product made with a clay-like substance called bentoquatam, also can block absorption of urushiol if it's applied before outdoor activities.

But, if you've touched a suspicious plant, all experts agree: Wash up quickly, with water (cold or hot) and soap, if available. You may have only 10 minutes before the urushiol binds with your skin and starts a reaction.

Once a rash starts, the experts recommend:

► Soothing, drying soaps and lotions, such as calamine, for mild cases.

► A trip to a doctor for steroid creams — or pills, for more severe cases.

Less helpful: over-the-counter hydrocortisone products and anesthetics.