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western poison oak

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L'herbe à la puce, le sumac à vernis et le Rhus diversiloba.

Poison ivy, western poison oak and poison sumac contain sap that causes a severe rash on humans.

LEARN HOW TO IDENTIFY THESE POISONOUS PLANTS

LEARN HOW THE SAP REACHES SENSITIVE SKIN

LEARN HOW TO AVOID CONTRACTING THE RASH

PLANTS CAUSING RHUS-DERMATITIS

Three plants contain a poisonous sap that causes *Rhus*-dermatitis, the most widespread skin disorder affecting Canadians. The plants are poison ivy (*Rhus radicans* L.), western poison oak (*Rhus diversiloba* T. & G.) and poison sumac (*Rhus vernix* L.). Poison ivy is the most common and widespread of the three.

Poison ivy

Poison ivy grows in every province except Newfoundland. It occurs on sandy, stony or rocky shores, sprouts in thickets, along the borders of woods, and in clearings. It reaches its greatest abundance in southern Ontario and southern Quebec.

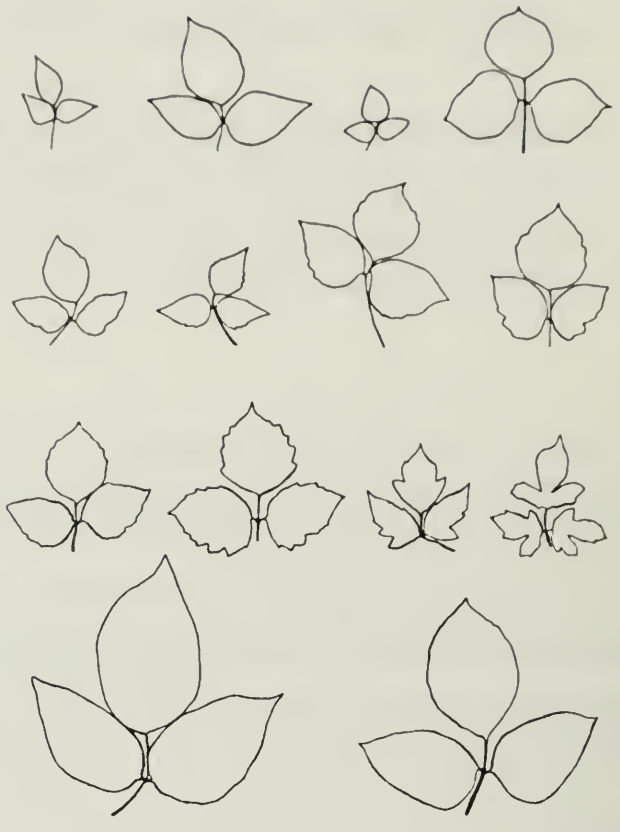
This glossy plant is a perennial that spreads by seeds and woody rhizomes. It may grow as a trailing vine, as a shrub 5-120 cm high, or as an aerial vine that climbs up to 15 m high on rough surfaces. Its leaves consist of three pointed leaflets; the middle one has a much longer stalk than the two outside ones. The leaflet edges are smooth or toothed, but rarely lobed. The leaves vary greatly in size, from 8-55 mm long. They are reddish when they first emerge in the spring, turn green during the summer, and become various shades of yellow, orange, red or bronze in the autumn. The small male and female flowers, normally found on separate plants, are cream to yellow-green and grow in clusters. The green-to-yellow berries are also clustered, globular, waxy and 3-7 mm in diameter.

Western poison oak

Few Canadians are likely to encounter western poison oak. This plant is confined to a few remote areas on the east coast of Vancouver Island and on some small adjacent islands. Western poison oak is similar to poison ivy in appearance; however, the leaflets have rounded tips rather than pointed ones.

Poison sumac

Poison sumac grows in some of the wooded swamps of southern Ontario and southern Quebec; few people are likely to come in contact with it. It is a tall shrub or small tree with 6-12 leaflets arranged in pairs, and an additional single leaflet at the tip of the midrib. The small yellowish-green flowers, borne in clusters, mature into whitish-green berries that hang in loose clusters 10-30 cm in length. The male and female flowers are on separate plants. Although nonpoisonous sumac species have similar leaves, their red fruits form distinctive, erect, cone-shaped terminal clusters.



Variation in size and shape of leaves in poisonous *Rhus* species

Branch in early summer

Autumn foliage

Flowers: male (left); female (right)

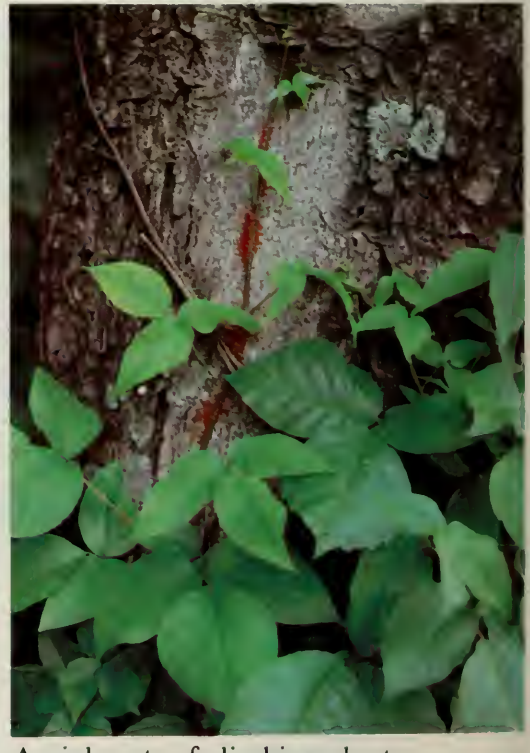
Berries

POISON IVY

Trailing plant in early spring

Climbing plant in late spring

Trailing plant in summer



Aerial roots of climbing plant

Flowers of trailing plant

Berries of climbing plant

Trailing plant in autumn

Climbing plant in autumn

Poison ivy (left); virginia creeper (right)

Leaves in spring

Plant in summer

Distribution of the three plants in Canada and the northern United States

SIMILAR PLANTS

People often mistake three other plants for poison ivy and western poison oak—hog peanut, Virginia creeper, and Manitoba maple seedlings. Here's how to tell them apart:

POISON IVY Three leaflets with pointed tips; the stalks of the leaves do not grow from the same point on the stem; stem woody in texture with woolly winter buds; cream to yellow-green flowers 2-5 mm across; clustered globular berries that are waxy, green to yellow and 3-7 mm in diameter.

WESTERN POISON OAK Similar to poison ivy except that its three leaflets have rounded tips.

HOG PEANUT Three leaflets but stem is not woody; it bears white-to-lilac flowers about 10 mm in diameter.

VIRGINIA CREEPER Five leaflets that bear bluish globular berries 5-7 mm in diameter.

MANITOBA MAPLE SEEDLINGS Three leaflets, but the leaves grow in pairs, with the stalks opposite each other on the stem.

SYMPTOMS OF POISONING AND TREATMENT

Most people develop symptoms 24-48 hours after contact. The interval varies considerably, because of individual sensitivity and the amount of sap contacting the skin. Healed areas often remain supersensitive to further contact for several months.

The first symptom is severe itching. Later, red inflammation and blistering of the skin occurs; in severe cases, oozing sores develop. The rash spreads by the poisonous sap, not as the result of contamination from sores. Although extremely irritating, most cases disappear in a week to 10 days. In the meantime, you can find relief through medication available in drugstores. If you develop a severe rash, especially one covering large areas or accompanied by above-normal body temperatures, see your doctor. Medical treatment is most effective if applied before the oozing sores appear.

Wash infected skin as soon as possible with cold water to minimize the severity of the rash and prevent the spread of the sap to uninfected parts of the body. Unfortunately, your skin absorbs the active compounds in the sap within the first 3 minutes, and you cannot prevent the dermatitis without medical treatment. Soap and water are superior to water alone in removing the sap, but they also temporarily remove a natural protective layer that helps keep the active compounds from being absorbed through the skin.

You can decontaminate clothing by laundering with soap or detergent. Wear protective gloves.

HOW POISONING OCCURS

Poison ivy, western poison oak, and poison sumac have the poisonous sap in their roots, stems, leaves and fruit. The sap is released when the plant is bruised, making it easiest to contract *Rhus*-dermatitis in the spring and early summer when leaves are tender. The sap may be deposited on the skin by direct contact with the plant or by contact with contaminated objects, such as shoes, clothing, tools and animals. Severe cases have occurred from sap-coated soot in the smoke of burning plants.

Under hot, humid conditions, the sap becomes inert in about a week. However, under dry conditions, it can retain its harmful effect for a long period.

The sap must penetrate the skin; therefore, the most severe poisoning affects areas with thin skin. Symptoms are less severe or do not occur at all in areas with thick skin or heavy hair.

Sensitivity to the sap varies greatly, not only from person to person but even during different periods in the same person's life. People are not born sensitive and cannot contract *Rhus*-dermatitis on the first contact; usually, several exposures are necessary, a process called sensitization. In general, children are more sensitive than adults, and people with light skin react more than those with darkly pigmented skin. Many animals and birds are completely immune.

No person is completely immune; some become sensitive to small amounts of the poison, whereas others react only to large amounts. Severe cases of poisoning have occurred after supposedly immune individuals have purposely rubbed leaves of the plants onto their skin. There is no acceptable method of immunization.

HOW TO ERADICATE PLANTS

Of the three poisonous *Rhus* species, usually only poison ivy grows in locations that warrant its eradication.

You can destroy poison ivy by cultivation. A single treatment seldom kills the plant completely, as it consists of a vast interconnected network of above- and below-ground horizontal rhizomes and above-ground vertical stems. Treat the area again as soon as regrowth occurs from any living parts. Repeated cultivation will eliminate poison ivy because it does not regenerate easily from plant fragments.

Chemicals are recommended for eradication in areas that do not permit cultivation and where some damage to other vegetation can be tolerated. You can buy a wide range of suitable chemicals at stores that sell pesticides. You may also obtain the latest recommendations for chemical control from your local agricultural representative or provincial ministry of agriculture.

CAUTION Be very careful when eradicating these plants. Your boots, protective clothing and implements may pick up the sap and transfer it to your skin. Do not burn the plants except under controlled conditions, as the sap-covered soot in the smoke will carry the poison. Also, dead poison ivy plants can still cause dermatitis and must be handled with care.