

# Deepening Our Appreciation for Poison Ivy, How to Identify It, and How to Remove It

By Andrew Fritz, Urban Agriculture Conservationist,  
HCSWCD  
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Certainly, poison-ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), which “contains the oily compound toxicodendrol in the sap found throughout the plant,” (Weeks & Weeks, Jr., 2012) can cause a very uncomfortable itchy skin rash that ranges from mild to severe and can persist for two weeks.

While poison-ivy is well-known for its nuisance, its wildlife and ecological benefits are not. Unlike with humans, poison-ivy does not affect wildlife. In fact, it is a great asset to the ecological community.



Figure 1: Poison Ivy Leaf (Source: <http://www.thebeelady.org/the-bee-lady-blog>)

## Habitat and Wildlife Uses

You can find poison ivy “in just about any location from the most disturbed urban area to an old growth forest, in wet to dry sites, full sun to shade.” (Weeks & Weeks, Jr., 2012). Additionally, because the berry of poison ivy is consumed by numerous wildlife species, especially birds, it grows abundantly along fencerows, edge habitat, or where birds roost. (Hill, 2000)



Figure 2: A Yellow-rumped Warbler eating poison ivy berries in winter.  
Photo courtesy of Jim McCormac.

According to Weeks and Weeks, Jr., “...poison-ivy is a wonderful resource for wildlife. Its variable growth forms benefit a myriad of species. The vines that crawl along the ground sending up vertical stems with leaves supply cover for ground nesters in summer and woody twigs that are relished by rabbits in winter. Those stems that grow as small shrubs, especially when supported by a stump or fence post, provide ideal nest sites for songbirds, such as blue grosbeaks and even kingbirds. Vines that climb into trees form a tree/vine complex that provides ideal bird and mammal nest sites. These latter vines, especially if on the forest edge, produce many small fruits that are favorites with songbirds; yellow-rumped warblers are said to winter in our region principally during years of heavy poison-ivy fruit crops. Finally, leaves of poison-ivy form a very important part of the spring/summer diets of white tailed deer in our region.” Additionally, the flowers

are “much frequented by bees.” (Hill, 2000)

In areas where poison ivy does not pose an imminent threat to safety, it is best left alone.

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## Identification

This is a vine. It can climb up to 60 feet into treetops, form a spreading shrub-like habit, or creep along the ground. “It is fast growing and long-lived.” (Weeks & Weeks, Jr., 2012) Additionally, poison ivy can have very large ‘trunks’ in undisturbed sites where it has grown uninhibited.



The vine of a mature poison ivy is hairy-like and matted with smaller roots.



The leaves of poison ivy are actually compound leaves. The three leaflets above actually make up one leaf. The petioles are long and hairy. The shape of the leaflet can vary, also.



Poison ivy berries are small. The picture above is of a berry before it ripens. They are about 1/4” in diameter. They turn white as the mature and often persist throughout the winter, making them a great source of food.



Flowers of poison ivy. Bees love this flower.



Poison ivy on a forest floor.

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Poison ivy is often confused with Woodbine, otherwise known as Virginia Creeper (and associated varieties). They essentially have the same habitat and habit. However, Virginia Creeper has five leaves as opposed to poison ivy, which has three leaflets.

## Safety

If you plan to enter an area where you might expect an encounter with poison ivy, come prepared with long pants, long-sleeved shirts, and maybe gloves. Afterwards, be sure to take a shower or wash affected areas you suspect had contact with poison ivy and wash your clothes. Do not touch your face or other sensitive areas if your hands have been exposed to poison ivy.

## Removal

There are several ways to remove poison ivy:

### Manually

Wearing proper clothing and gloves to protect yourself from coming into direct contact with the poison ivy, pull up all leaves, stems, and roots of the plant, dispose in a plastic bag, and throw away. This option, depending on your thoroughness, may require additional 'pullings.'

### Herbicide

There are several ways of eliminating the poison ivy using synthetic or organic herbicides. It is important to note that herbicides will kill all or most plants that it meets. You can find synthetic herbicides, some specially formulated for poison ivy, at most garden centers. Herbicides that are organic and less toxic are harder to find. Below is one type that may work:

- [HOMS EcoBlend Weed Killer](#)

### Vinegar Method

Another simple, and far-less toxic, way to kill weeds, especially poison ivy, is with a vinegar, salt, and dish soap solution.

#### Items You'll Need

1. 1 x Sprayer
2. Dish Soap
3. Pot (for stove)
4. 1 gallon of vinegar (5% solution works but higher concentrations are more potent)
5. 1 cup of salt (regular table salt is fine)

#### Directions for Creating the Solution

1. Pour the gallon of vinegar into a pot and heat it over the stove. Low heat is fine...just warm enough to dissolve the salt.
2. Add the cup of salt and stir until it is completely dissolved.
3. Allow the solution of vinegar and salt to cool.



Figure 3: Woodbine or Virginia Creeper is similar to poison ivy in habit but is not poisonous to humans.

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4. Add 2 tablespoons of dish soap to the solution.
5. Pour the mixture into a spray bottle.

## Directions for Spraying:

1. Spray the mixture only on the weeds you want to kill. It will damage any leaf it meets.
2. Be sure to cover all the leaves with the solution
3. Repeat again after 10 to 14 days to cover any missed areas or stubborn weeds.

## References

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