

Getting Rid of Poison Ivy

by Debbie Lauer, Bell County Master Gardener

We have all heard the saying "leaves of three, let it be." Unfortunately though catchy, this alone will not protect us from that dreaded summer time affliction, the poison ivy rash. The plants don't always play by the rules and sometimes have leaves in groups of five. There is another phrase that should help in the identification that I recently learned. That phrase is "thumbs on mittens". This phrase refers to the tendency for poison ivy to have larger lobes near the base of the leaf that look like "thumbs." Combine the two phrases and also realize that the plant can be a vine or have a small shrub like appearance and you realize that you have to be careful out there. For those of us unlucky enough to have this plant growing in our yards there is no easy way to rid ourselves of it. A combination of an herbicide that specifically labels poison ivy as a target plant, good old fashioned elbow grease, and persistence is the key to being poison ivy free.

The use of any herbicide should be carefully considered. Always follow the directions on the label and use the minimum amount needed to do the job. To minimize spraying plants you do not want to kill, pick a calm day, the less air movement the better. Be sure to protect yourself, wear long pants, long sleeves, rubber gloves and goggles. To reduce the amount of handling chemicals (and therefore possible accidents) buy a formula that needs no dilution. Carry a piece of cardboard with you as you treat the unwanted plants. If you have a plant, tree, or shrub near the poison ivy shield your landscape plants with the cardboard. If you have a poison ivy vine growing up a tree cut the vine and paint the stump of the vine with herbicide. Be sure to treat any small plants that sprout out around the base of the vine. Once the plant appears to be dead it is still not safe to handle. The oil that causes the allergic reaction can remain active long after the plant is dead.

If you do not want to use an herbicide, the plants can be pulled up. One reference I found advocated pulling up the vines now as it is thought that the drought and heat of summer would assist in killing the plant. Another source I found recommended spring or fall when the ground is soft and moist making it easier to get the whole root. Again be sure to protect yourself, this time from the plant. Long sleeves, long pants and sturdy rubber gloves should be used. A person who is particularly sensitive to the plant should be especially careful or should not handle the plants at all. One suggestion I found, recommended putting your hand and arm inside a plastic bag such as a bread bag and grabbing pliers through the bag. Grab the stem with the pliers, once the plant is pulled up, reverse the bag over the plant and tie it off. The plant will grow back if you do not get the whole root or a piece breaks off. This is where the persistence comes in. More than likely you will not get rid of all of it the first year. Be sure to go after it in succeeding years. Lots of birds eat poison ivy berries and can deposit seeds in your yard, get the seedlings early before large root systems develop.

If you choose the manual method of eradication, be sure to clean your shoes, clothes, and any tools you used to pull up or dig out the roots as soon as you are done. Remember all parts of the plant contain the oil, roots, stem, and leaves. If your skin does come into contact with any part of the plant be sure to wash it off within 5 minutes to avoid getting the rash. Isopropyl alcohol and lots of cold water are the best way for getting rid of the oil containing the allergen. The alcohol dissolves the oil and the cold water will dilute it. Do not use warm water it can enhance the penetration of the oil into the skin. Soap or hand wipes can also spread the oil over a larger area.

Finally, this is one time I will tell you to send these plants (preferably double bagged) to your landfill. Don't put them in your compost pile and do not burn them, the oil can be carried by the smoke and can be very hazardous if breathed in.