

How to Get Rid of Poison Ivy

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When we first moved into our home in 2001, there was a lovely vine growing up an old ash tree in our yard. It had five leaves, so I knew it was Virginia Creeper. There was also some wild grape vines growing up the tree and the birds seemed to love it. This tree was also right next to the new shade garden I developed in 2002, so I watered it when I watered the shade garden and the vine grew and grew and turned a lovely red color in the fall. Spectacular.

Then one year, I got a rash on my face. Doctor said it was poison ivy. What? I don't have poison ivy anywhere near my yard. I had been to a nursery the day before and had been exposed to some poisonous tropicals there. That must have been it, because we don't have poison ivy in our yard. Guess again.

I took a closer look at that vine I had been watering for five years. The stem was huge at this point and hairy. That was a bad sign. I looked closer at the leaves, which were huge and lush. They were all three leafed. I could find nothing left of the Virginia Creeper or the wild grapes I had seen in the past. We did indeed have poison ivy.

Now what should I do. Well first I researched the heck out of it online and found a helpful site called Posion-Ivy.org. I had no idea that poison ivy could look so different. This vine had smooth leaves, but there are also varieties with notched edges. Mine all seems to have a smooth edge. Newer leaves can appear to be shiny, while older leaves are duller. As the vine gets older, the stem gets "hairy" a tell-tale sign that it's poison ivy. Young plants looks very similar to clematis and Virginia creeper, so it's always safer to wear gloves when in an area that has had poison ivy in the past.

Poison Ivy can grow as a vine or as a scrub and can creep along the ground and never even cling to a tree that is nearby. It often grows at the edge of fields or lawns where it may not be mowed often but gets enough sun to thrive.

Researchers are telling us that poison ivy will only increase and get worse with the increase of carbon dioxide in the air. This sort of creates a super poison ivy that can cause harsher rashes. You can't tell me that global warming isn't affecting our planet. It is certainly affecting some plants.

So what can you do to get rid of it? I am a big advocate when it comes to not using chemical herbicides and pesticides in the garden, but when it comes to poison ivy, I do use an herbicide especially made for controlling poison ivy. I use it sparingly and according to the manufacturer's instructions, so as to cause as little damage to the environment as possible.

Here are some tips I've learned along the way to help get rid of poison ivy.

Get all the tools you will need out ahead of time, including any products designed to clean your tools and your skin. You don't want to be fumbling trying to find something with contaminated hands. I suggest having the following items on hand to start.

- Pruning shears
- Garden knife

- Shovel
- Latex or nitrile gloves, 2 pair
- Rubber gloves or garden gloves with a rubber coating
- Plastic bags, at least two
- Long sleeved shirt and long pants
- Wear shoes that can be washed in the washing machine
- Rubbing alcohol
- Skin wash especially for removing poison ivy oil
- Face mask and protective goggles
- Have a helper available

If it's summer time when you discover and begin to remove the poison ivy, pick a cool, dry day with no wind. You need to cover yourself from head to toe, wearing long sleeves, long pants, long socks and gloves that reach beyond the cuff of your shirt. If you have long hair, pull it back so as not to accidentally touch the vine with your hair. You can pass the oils of the plant from your hair to other parts of your body. When wearing gloves, make sure they have a plastic or rubber coating as the oils can soak into the cloth. I like to wear two pair of latex or nitrile gloves underneath my gardening gloves or yellow rubber gloves. You'll see why later. You may also feel better wearing protective goggles and a face mask so as not to breathe in any fumes that may come from broken vines. Eye protection is important in case the vine should snap and hit you in the face.

Once you are covered from head to toe, you can now begin to pull up the vines as best as you can. Water the ground around the vine well the night before to make this task a little easier. I tend to go slow, so as not to accidentally touch the vine to my face. Try to pull up the vine by the roots. Dig down with a garden knife or shovel to make sure you've removed all the roots. Dispose of the vines in a plastic bag, which will be disposed of in the trash. You do not want to burn or compost poison ivy as the smoke can severely harm your lungs and the oils in the vine can remain active for years, even into dormancy and after the vine is dead.

Whatever you do, don't weed wack a poison ivy vine. All you will do is throw vine debris all over. Some may get on you and some may get on the surrounding area and get on you at a later date. When you cut it, cut it by hand with a sharp garden knife or pruning shears that can be cleaned thoroughly after you are done.

Once you have removed the vine as best as you can, you can apply an herbicide to any stump or remaining leaves that you can't get too. The herbicide is only effective while the plant is actively growing, so it's important to apply it to the leaves and to a fresh cut. It will take some time and possibly multiple applications, but any poison ivy herbicide should kill it eventually. Apply the herbicide wearing a clean glove or using a gloved hand that has not touched the poison ivy. Or better yet, have your helper, who has not been touching poison ivy, do the spraying. You don't want to contaminate the bottle and then re-infect yourself at a later date.

If poison ivy is growing in your lawn, your best bet is to mow it regularly. You may have to mow the grass lower than you would normally like to, but that may be the only way to get the vine completely. Repeated mowing should starve the plant of its energy. Never walk barefoot in a lawn that has had poison ivy and be careful if you bag your grass clippings. Overseed your lawn with a good quality grass seed in the spring and fall to discourage any new growth from starting. If you have a healthy lawn of grass, there is less of a chance of weeds like poison ivy to take control.

You can also cover the infected area with a tarp for several months smothering the vine and weeds at the same time. Then in the fall, apply a layer of compost and then grass seed to get your lawn growing again.

If you don't want to tackle removing the vine during the growing season, winter is an excellent time as well. There will be no leaves on the vine, so it can be easier to remove the vines then. Pull up as many of the vines as possible and cut off any that you can't remove at the base. You can leave the vines attached to the tree if you like. If the vines are huge like mine are, it will be hard to remove the vine anyway. Watch for new growth in the spring and pull any new vines, or use an herbicide at the first sign of growth.

Once you are done pulling the vines, it's time to clean up. There are products on the market especially designed to remove the oil of poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac and can be used to wash your tools as well as your clothing. Once you have all the vines inside the plastic bag, remove your garden gloves if you have a latex glove underneath. Put the plastic bag of poison ivy inside another clean bag and tie it up. I wouldn't want someone else to get contaminated from the outside of the bag. While still wearing this pair of latex gloves, clean off any of the garden tools you had to use to remove the vines. Rubbing alcohol is excellent for removing the oils. Then you can wash the tools in soapy cold water, scrubbing the handles and blades. Have your helper pour the alcohol from the bottle to help avoid contaminating that container.

If you think you got any of the poison ivy oil on yourself, you must remove it within 30 minutes to reduce spread and to reduce the chances of rash. Some people may think they are immune to poison ivy, but research has shown that repeated exposures can cause new sensitivity and people who have always broken out can suddenly become immune. Unfortunately, since the vine is getting nastier with the increase of carbon dioxide in our air, the oils are becoming more potent and dangerous every year. At this point, you should still have on two pairs of latex or nitrile gloves. Remove the top pair that you had on when you cleaned the garden tools. Now carefully remove all your clothes and either throw them away or put them in the washing machine to be washed. Do not mix contaminated clothes with your regular laundry. Wash in cold water with detergent, using vinegar in the final rinse in place of fabric softener. I also like to add Borax and Washing Soda to my laundry since we have hard water. Borax and Washing Soda will also help your detergent work better. Wash again as normal and dry as usual. Have your helper open any doors for you, if necessary.

Remove the last pair of gloves that you are wearing and wipe any exposed areas of your skin that may have been exposed to poison ivy with a cloth saturated with rubbing alcohol or one of the poison ivy oil removers you can buy from the drugstore. Do this before you have wet your body with cold water as the alcohol and cleansers will be more effective at removing the oil from dry surfaces. Never use hot or warm water as this will just spread the oil. I usually go over the area more than once just to make sure. Rubbing alcohol is cheap, so it's no big deal to clean yourself again. Throw away the cloth you used to clean yourself or put it with the clothes you are laundering.

Once you are sure you have removed all the oil from your body, you can now safely take a cool shower and wash your body as normal. Avoid hot showers in case there is still a trace of oil on your body.

Some of these precautions may seem extreme or redundant, but I have never gotten poison ivy on me again after that first time, no matter how often I was in the garden trying to get rid of it. So I'll stick by my methods. You may have your own, and I'd love to hear about them.