

## Year Round Gardening

### **The Enemy in Our Midst, Western Poison Ivy**

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*But poison ivy, Lord'll make you itch!*

*You're gonna need an ocean of calamine lotion*

*You'll be scratchin' like a hound*

*The minute you start to mess around*

*1979 song by the Coasters*

Poison ivy is not a common plant in Colorado, but I can personally attest to its presence in Pikes Peak region. Years ago, we had an infestation of poison ivy. I had a serious reaction, my physician told me there were two options, sell our home, or get rid of the plant. Due to my sensitivity, my husband was stuck with the second option.

Western poison ivy (*Toxicodendron rydbergii*) is closely related to eastern poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) and poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*). Poison oak is primarily a pacific coastal pest, and eastern poison ivy and poison sumac only exist in eastern and central part of the country. Poison sumac is not related to ornamental sumac shrubs (*Rhus sp*).

All three share the same allergenic oil in their sap, Urshiol. Contact with this oil can cause an allergic reaction, ranging from an itchy, blistery rash, to a rare anaphylactic reaction. The rash can last 1 to 2 weeks. Not all individuals are sensitive to the toxin. Urshiol is a non-water soluble, very stable substance. It can remain in soil for up to two years and contact with dead plants in the *Toxicodendron* genus can be allergenic. If you have this plant, control will ideally include eradication followed by removal of the plant material.

Western poison ivy grows only as a ground vine. It can be identified using the following few simple rules:

- Leaves of three, never more
- Alternating leaves, never opposite
- Never has thorns, or saw toothed or scalloped leaves
- Can be shiny or dull
- Leaves can be notched or unnotched

If you suspect that you have seen poison ivy in your garden, use the rules above. If you still aren't sure go to [www.Poison-ivy.org](http://www.Poison-ivy.org) and take the poison ivy quiz. This photo-based tool will help with identification.



*Photo courtesy of Fredricka Bogardus*

The vines tend to grow where water is available, often on edges of lakes, ponds, streams and rivers. I have observed it recently, on the south facing bank of a drainage area. While poison ivy is somewhat shade tolerant it prefers sun.

Control should be aimed at eradication, and two good options exist, glyphosate can be applied to the vines, however glyphosate is a non-selective herbicide and will harm any plant it contacts. Another option is application of a product containing triclopyr, a selective herbicide that kills broadleaf plants but does not harm grasses. It may take several applications to completely eradicate the plant.

Once the plant is completely dead consider removing as much of the remains as possible. When working around this plant dress in a manner that minimizes contact between the plant and skin. If possible wear clothing that you are willing to discard after using to eliminate residual exposure to the toxic oil.

When you have questions, Colorado State University Extension has research-based answers. Get answers to your horticultural questions at [ask.extension.org](http://ask.extension.org) or by contacting a Colorado Master Gardener Volunteer at 520-7684 or emailing [CSUmg2@elpasoco.com](mailto:CSUmg2@elpasoco.com). Volunteers are available to help you Monday through Thursday from 9:00 to noon.