

Live Free and Dig

with the Littleton Garden Club

Poison Ivy

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Littleton Garden Club

Poison ivy seems to grow where you don't want to see it!

Poison ivy is a pioneer species. It grows and reproduces quickly using ample sunlight from open areas such as fields. When a large tree dies or there is other disturbance, it can cause an opening which lets light in. That is where poison ivy might flourish. It's moderately shade tolerant, but lush,



COURTESY

"Leaves of three, let me be." This patch is across from Remich Park by a trail.

dense growth happens in full sun. Poison ivy can also be found on dunes of coastal areas, and in

open, sunny areas such as along roadsides and trails.

It is an important food source for wildlife. I read that 60 species of birds eat fruits from poison ivy. Migrating birds in the fall eat some berries; however, they feed mostly on high-quality fruits, with higher lipid content. This leaves berries for the winter resident bird species to feed on when other foods are scarce. Distribution of poison ivy

is aided by birds. Many seeds go undamaged through their digestive systems and are distributed freely.

Small bees and flies pollinate the flowers in the spring. Insects feed on the plant, and caterpillars from moths feed on the leaves. Larval insects spin silk to roll and fold the leaves of poison ivy over to enclose them for the pupa stage.

With the exception of
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primates, other animals show no sensitivity to poison ivy. So, one natural method of control is goats. The "poison ivy patrol goats" from Londonderry, NH are one example. They get "rented out" to munch away large areas of problem plants from under power lines. Lebanon NH Parks and Rec. department regularly use goats to "clean up" popular park areas.

Dogs may not have any problems, but they can carry the oil on fur and urushiol can remain active for as long as ten years. I learned that from a rake that had been used

in an area dotted with poison ivy. This means the oil lives on objects that just barely had contact with the plant.

Finding poison ivy on actively used parts of our property causes mild panic and quick preparations for removal. All parts of the plant *Rhus radicans* contain urushiol, from the reddish-gray berries produced in fall to the tough, rhizomatous roots.

When poison ivy takes root, a good option is to remove it quickly to avoid accidental contact and spread. Uncontrolled, it can grow to the size of a small shrub, although this is a more common

with poison oak (*Rhus toxicodendron*). It's helpful to know natural ways to kill it do exist.

Burning it is very hazardous as it releases poison ivy's irritants into the air we breathe. Pouring boiling water over the plant, is considered safe. This method requires multiple applications, but dieback eventually happens when the water is applied over the crown of the plant.

Once you've had a rash from poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac, doctor's say symptoms might appear more quickly in repeat exposures. To lower the risk, wear long sleeved

shirts and gloves that are impervious. Rubbing alcohol helps remove any urushiol resin from skin surfaces. I keep some handy in my traveling gardener kit and backpack for short hikes.

As gardeners, we are assured there will be new sightings of poison ivy. Hopefully, this season will go by without close, itchy contact!

Littleton Garden Club is a community oriented organization. New members welcomed from around the area. For more information, please visit our Web site at: <https://www.littletonnhgardenclub.org/>.