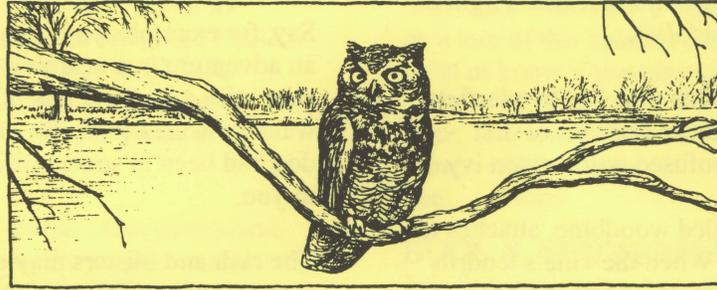


STILLMAN NEWSLETTER



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PICK YOUR POISON... IVY

-- Mark Spreyer

There is little point in coming up with a poetic introduction to a plant that can cause a nasty dermatitis. So, let's just get to it. No plant is better known or more notorious than poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*).

Toxicodendron means "poison tree." While poison ivy is a woody plant, it is a vine not a tree.

The second part of its scientific name, *radicans*, means "rooting" which refers to the red hairs, or aerial rootlets, that allow the vine to cling to tree trunks and fences.

It should be noted that poison ivy is a vine with aspirations. In some instances, it seems to be standing alone like a tree with a corkscrew trunk. In fact, it was probably wrapped around a dead snag that decomposed leaving the healthy vine behind.

In other situations, it lacks the aerial rootlets and grows about 3 -5 feet tall as a, get this, "subshrub."

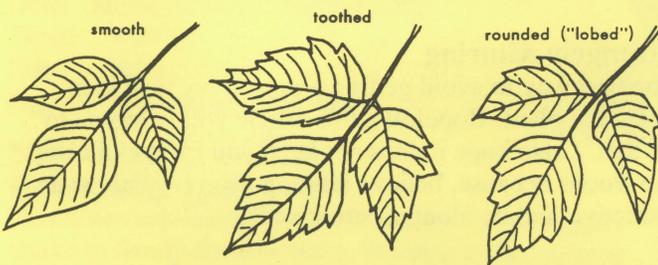


Figure 1. Poison ivy leaves can vary in appearance. In our area, the toothed version is quite common.

Leaflets Three

As the old saying goes, "Leaves of three, let it be." To be botanically correct, it should go, "Leaflets three, let it be." Normally, I'd try to describe the shape of the leaves but it isn't that easy (see figure 1). The green leaflets can be dull or shiny, pointed or rounded, and toothed or smooth.

Of course, there are other plants with a trifoliate appearance. Beautiful spring wildflowers like jack-in-the-pulpit and trillium have three leaflets as does box-elder (see figure 2) but none of these are vines.

With these plants in mind, please remember "leaves of three" does not necessarily mean "spray herbicide on me."

So you might be thinking, "What kind of habitat does poison ivy prefer?" I'd put the question another way, "What kind of habitat doesn't it prefer?"

It can be found growing on virtually any kind of soil both in open areas and in shady locations. It does particularly well in calcareous soils along lake margins and stream banks.

Classification Conundrum

For years, poison ivy was lumped in the *Rhus* genus with the sumacs. About forty years ago, many plant taxonomists moved poison ivy and its western cousin, poison oak (*T. diversilobum*), into the *Toxicodendron* genus.

Since both of these poisonous plants have hanging white berries while the other non-toxic sumacs have upright, fuzzy, red berries, this reclassification makes sense.

Speaking of poison oak, it's three leaflets are also extremely variable. Not surprisingly, poison oak's species name, *diversilobum*, means "diversely lobed." Keep in mind that some authorities still file poison ivy and poison oak under *Rhus*.

STILLMAN NATURE CENTER

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Partners in Vine

One of our standard stops along the trails here at Stillman is a corner where two vines grow side by side. One is poison ivy and the other is a frequent associate, Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*).

As its scientific name suggests, this vine has five leaflets (see figure 2). However, when those leaflets are first emerging in spring, it can be confused with poison ivy.

Virginia creeper, sometimes called woodbine, attaches to a tree in a distinctive manner. When the vine's tendrils come in contact with tree bark or a fence post, they form adhesive disks at their tips.

These small disks are amazingly tenacious. It has been estimated that a tendril sporting five disk-bearing branchlets can support ten pounds.

Another difference from poison ivy is that Virginia creeper has dark-blue berries rather than white.

Who Planted It?

When showing poison ivy to a scout group, a little girl asked me, "Who planted it?" I chuckled at the idea of a human planting it, but wait, I'm getting ahead of myself.

While poison ivy may irritate a human's skin, it satisfies a hungry bird's stomach. In fact, over sixty species of birds dine on poison ivy's berries.

Everything from catbirds and kinglets to thrushes and woodpeckers are happy to dine at *Cafe Radicans*. Once the berries have been digested, the seeds come out the other end wrapped in nice packets of bird fertilizer.

In some cases, believe it or not, humans have intentionally planted poison ivy. You see, it can turn lovely shades of yellow, orange or red in fall. So, back in the 19th century a British explorer, Captain Frederick Beechey, brought it to his home country to decorate English gardens. O.K., now I'm chuckling again.

Radicans Rash

One can only assume that this historic transcontinental transplanter was one of the lucky few who is not sensitive or, to be more precise, allergic to poison ivy.

The rash most of us get from poison ivy is caused by coming in contact with urushiol, an oil found in the leaves, stems, flowers, berries, and roots of poison ivy.

Since urushiol is an allergen, medical folks refer to the skin rash as an allergic contact dermatitis. The rash

generally appears within 8 to 48 hours after contact with urushiol. Remember, you don't have to actually touch the plant to be affected.

Say, for example, your dog had the opportunity to go on an adventure in a nearby woods. You greet him at the door with a hug and lots of pets. The next morning, you wake up with a puffy face and red hands. Odds are, the dog had been in some poison ivy shortly before returning to you.

The rash and blisters may continue to spread for several days but only to areas of skin that came in contact with urushiol. Also, it is not spread by scratching the itchy skin or popping a blister. In about ten days, the rash should clear up.

As mentioned earlier, some people appear to be immune to urushiol. If you are one of them, I strongly suggest that you don't push your luck. The so-called immunity is a famously fickle phenomenon.

If you know you touched poison ivy, washing the affected area

with strong soap and water is the first thing to do. Should the rash develop, some relief can be found in nonprescription antihistamines, calamine lotion, aloe vera, and taking cool baths.

Serious cases should be treated by a doctor. For instance, forest fire fighters have developed inflamed respiratory membranes from inhaling smoke that contained airborne particles of the irritating ivy resin.

Strangely Alluring

The best way to avoid getting a poison ivy rash is to avoid the plant. Hopefully, this article will help you to do that. I also hope it does not keep you from exploring the woods because, believe it not, poison ivy can be an attractive feature along a nature walk.

In early May, as the buds begin to open, the delicate emerging ivy leaves are an opalescent burgundy that puts many a wildflower to shame.

I thought I was alone in actually admiring this noxious plant until I came across the following passage written by Donald Stokes, "...the plant is strangely alluring, its leaves tempting to touch in summer when they are shiny, or to collect in autumn, when they turn brilliant colors."

Perhaps, I should stop laughing at Captain Beechey.

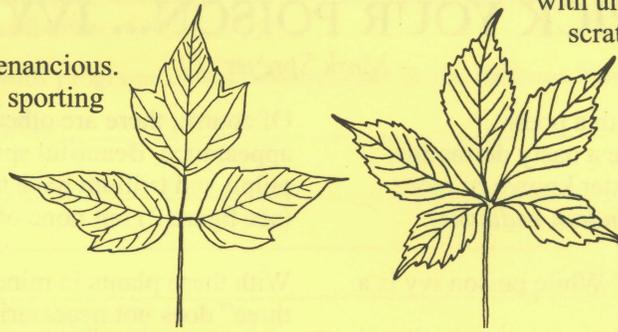


Figure 2. Virginia creeper (right) and box-elder (left) are sometimes confused with poison ivy. Box-elder has 3 - 5 leaflets.

PROGRAMS

Program Basics: TO MAKE RESERVATIONS for programs (except for bird banding open houses), PLEASE CALL US AT (847) 428-OWLS(6957), OR EMAIL STILLMAN AT: stillnc@wildblue.net. Remember to include your name, phone number, and the number of people that will be attending.

If less than 5 - 10 people (varying with the activity) have called two days prior to a program, the program could well be cancelled. So, don't forget to call the nature center in advance. If you discover that you are unable to attend, please call to cancel your reservations. This courtesy will be greatly appreciated.

BIRD BANDING

Watch Mark Spreyer, a licensed bird bander, measure, weigh and record data about our resident and migratory birds. Birds are not caught in a predictable manner, so come prepared to hike the trails. With luck, you'll see a bird in the hand and two in the bush. If it is raining, the banding open house will be cancelled.

Date: Sundays, June 6, July 4, Aug. 1
Time: 9:00AM to Noon
Fee: None

SUNDAY MORNING BIRD WALKS

Mark Spreyer will lead a morning bird walk. Binoculars and field guides are a must. If you don't have any, don't worry, Stillman does.

If it's raining, the activity will be cancelled. Please call (847) 428-OWLS to let us know if you plan to attend.

Date: Sundays, June 13 & August 22
Time: 8:00AM
Fee: None
Age: 10 years and up

NEW FAMILY SERIES:

Outdoors We Learn Stuff!

On the second Saturday of each month, we will explore nature in family-friendly ways. Whether in the forest or marsh, prairie or pond; we promise that your family will have fun learning stuff outdoors. Space is limited so please call or email Stillman to let us know if your family wants to be one of the charter members of O.W.L.S.

Date: Saturdays, July 10, Aug. 14
Time: 10:00 - Noon
Age: Kids age 5 - 12 with parent(s)
Member's Fee: Free
Non-member's Fee: \$10.00/program



PRAIRIE RAMBLE

Our volunteers, under the leadership of Daria Sapp, have been working hard to get prairie plants growing in Stillman's "south forty." This is your chance to join Daria on a tour of this colorful site. Please call (847) 428-OWLS to let us know if you plan to attend.

Date: Sunday, July 18
Time: 10:00AM
Fee: None



BUGS & BUTTERFLIES

Join Stillman's naturalist and search the nature center's woods and fields for butterflies, beetles, grasshoppers and other bugs. If you've got a bug net at home, bring it along! Don't forget to call (847) 428-OWLS to make reservations.

Date: Sunday, July 25
Time: 2:00 PM
Fee: None

ONCE UPON A BIRD...

We are happy to welcome the Barrington Area Library to Stillman. With their stories and our birds of prey, it will be a great day for the kids. Don't forget to register at barringtonarealibrary.org

Dates: Tuesday, July 27
Time: 10:00AM
Age: 3 - 8 years old



RAPTORS for PHOTOGRAPHERS

Now's your chance to get an unimpeded close-up of great horned, barn, and screech owls plus a peregrine falcon and broad-winged hawk. We will bring the birds out in the favorable morning light to increase your chances of getting that perfect image. Drop by anytime between 8:30 and 11:30AM. Keep in mind that all the birds won't be available at the same moment.

P.S. If you can't distinguish between a phone and a camera, this day is not for you.

Date: Saturday, July 31
Time: 8:30 - 11:30 AM
Fee: \$10/person



POND LIFE: Get the Whole Scoop!

This afternoon, with the help of long-handled dip nets, families will scoop into our pond in hopes of catching crayfish, dragonfly larvae, tadpoles and other rarely seen pond creatures. Dress in clothes and shoes you don't mind getting muddy.

Date: Sunday, August 8
Time: 2:00PM
Fee: None

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If you aren't already a member, please consider joining us.

- Yes, I'd like to become or continue as a member of the Stillman Nature Center.
I enclose my tax deductible contribution of \$_____.
- I'd like to help as a volunteer with programs or land management at the Stillman Nature Center, please call me.
- Please send a gift membership from _____ to the name and address listed below.

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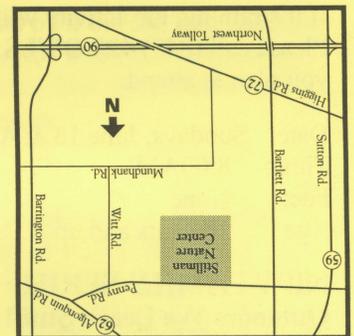
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