

# Wenke Wisdom

## POISON IVY

The single most common cause of allergic reaction in the United States is that of Poison Ivy. In the Midwest it grows as a crawling vine. In the far Northern and Western areas of the U.S. and Canada, it grows as a shrub. All parts of the plant can cause severe skin inflammation, itching, and blisters because they act on the histamine found in the cells of the human body. The roots, stems, leaves, berries and flowers are all toxic; producing a volatile oil called urushiol. It is rendered inactive by water; therefore, it is imperative to wash all clothing and shoes that have come in contact with it, as it can persist on these items for months to years. Use water only unless you know the soap you are using contains no oils; otherwise, it will spread the poison ivy oil even further. After washing, apply rubbing alcohol with cotton balls to the parts of skin that are affected.

In those who are hypersensitive, a reaction appears as a streak or line rash within 12-48 hours. Redness and swelling occur, followed by blisters and severe itching. Within 2-3 days, the blisters become crusted and begin to scale. A typical Poison Ivy rash takes 10 days or longer to heal completely. To relieve itching, cool showers and over-the-counter preparations like calamine lotion work well. Soaking in an oatmeal or baking soda bath will also help to dry blisters. In severe cases, cortisone creams are helpful. A person who has extreme swelling on the face, arms, legs and genitals, eyes become swollen shut, or experience itching severe enough to interrupt sleep, should seek medical attention.

Poison Ivy has three very distinct leaflets per stem. Teach your children the rhyme, "leaflets three, let them be", for quick identification. Also, Poison ivy can intermingle with Virginia creeper (which has five leaves and is not poisonous) making it difficult to identify.

To eradicate an area full of poison ivy, wait until a cool day in the spring or fall, after it has rained, pull up the plants, roots and all, let the debris air dry out in the open until completely dry and dead, then bury it. Dress from head to toe, wearing protective clothing and sturdy shoes and remember to wash all clothing when you are finished.

Never, never burn any part of the plant. The urushiol irritant rides high and wide on smoke particles, meaning the inside of the mouth, throat, windpipe, and lungs will react as violently as on the back of your hand. In fact, smoke from burned plant specimens over 100 years old can still cause dermatitis, inside the body or out.