

Poison ivy: More of it, and stronger

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By John Hayes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Brushing against the wrong weed in the pumpkin patch could result in an unforgettable autumn.

Weed Science magazine recently reported that poison ivy has grown increasingly aggressive since the 1950s, with significant increases in leaf size and oil content. Whether that's a naturally occurring trend, a result of development creating better habitat for the plant, or a genetic counter-reaction to herbicides, it's bad news for more than 350,000 people who get the itch each year.

It's a particularly strong year for poison ivy," said Lou Paradise, president and chief of research of a company that makes Topricin, a poison ivy treatment. "It's important for everyone to be aware there are ways to prevent outbreaks, or safely treat rashes and minimize the discomfort and duration should they occur."

One of the first hazardous plants identified in the New World, the term "poison ivy" was coined in 1609 by Captain John Smith at Jamestown, Va. The hardy plant thrives in brisk autumn weather and oil from its vines can irritate skin even in winter. Clear poison ivy sap contains urushiol, an oily resin that sticks to skin proteins, triggering the hypersensitivity that causes the itching, burning red skin eruptions.

Urushiol oil remains active for years. Handling dead poison ivy leaves or vines can cause a rash, and oil transferred to clothing, tools, even pets can cause inflammation after contact with human skin. Ingested oil can damage the lining of the mouth and digestive tract; inhaled smoke from burned poison ivy can cause painful rashes on the lungs, impair respiration and could become life-threatening.

The best way to stop the itch is to avoid contact with the plant.

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