

News Article

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Don't Touch Me!

Many of us love nature and walking through the woods or other natural areas. But, what potential dangers may be lurking from plants that cause a nasty itch? Let's review some of the "don't touch me" plants. Social distancing from these plants is definitely recommended!

Poison ivy

Perhaps the most common and best known "don't touch me" plant, poison ivy can result in blotching of the skin, burning water blisters, pain, and an intense itching sensation. Symptoms may be evident quickly, or within a few days.

Poison ivy is a 3-leaved plant. To be more accurate, each leaf has three leaflets that comprise the overall leaf. This botanical characteristic prompted the saying, "Leaves of three, let it be." It looks a lot like the leaves of the boxelder tree, making young boxelder seedlings and young poison ivy vines difficult to tell apart. However, poison ivy leaves are arranged alternately on twigs, while boxelder leaves are arranged oppositely. Poison ivy also has a vining habit over time – climbing and attaching to tree trunks or whatever is close by.

All parts of the plant contain and secrete a nonvolatile oil called urushiol (oleoresin), which affects the skin. The oil is not soluble in water, so washing with water alone does no good, and may spread the oil. Washing with a strong alkali soap is more effective, especially if done soon after exposure.

Don't burn poison ivy after it has been cut or grubbed out and dried. The smoke from burning the plant contains particles that can cause serious injury to the eyes, skin, and respiratory tract.

A real mystery of nature is that some birds will eat poison ivy fruit (a greenish white, smooth berry) without any complications (and then replant it elsewhere, with natural fertilizer added). Deer can also munch on poison ivy twigs.

Poison oak

Poison oak is a low-growing, non-climbing shrub with three leaflets, much like poison ivy. Although there have been unconfirmed reports of poison oak in Indiana, it is not known to occur in Indiana. Atlantic poison oak has been confirmed in nearby states of Illinois, Tennessee, and West Virginia.

Poison sumac

A rare plant, poison sumac is generally found in or near wet areas and swamps. It can be about 6-20 feet tall, with compound leaves that have 7-13 leaflets and smooth margins. Hairless green berries turn gray-white when mature. So, if you see a sumac with hairy berries or berries with a red to crimson color, it is more likely a non-toxic sumac.

Plants that are often confused with “don’t touch me” plants

Fragrant sumac and Virginia creeper are both non-poisonous. Fragrant sumac has pubescent (hairy or fuzzy) leaves and red fruit. Virginia creeper, also called woodbine, is a common native vine present throughout Indiana. It has five leaflets. Young Boston ivy leaves have three leaflets, while the mature leaves are 3-lobed, but not separated as leaflets.

Other plants to avoid or be cautious around include poison hemlock, cow parsnip, giant hogweed, stinging nettle, and spurge.

For further information, find Purdue Extension’s publication on poison ivy, authored by B. Rosie Lerner and Travis Legleiter, at www.edustore.purdue.edu. Some of the above material was sourced from the publication.