

An Ocean of Calamine Lotion

By Susan Camp

Do you remember the 1959 song “Poison Ivy” by The Coasters? Have you ever needed “an ocean of calamine lotion” for the red, bumpy, itchy rash of poison ivy? Have you noticed a greater abundance of poison ivy with bigger leaves? I can answer “yes” to all three questions, so I decided to find out more about this toxic plant and its cousins, poison oak and poison sumac.

Most of us remember the parental warning of “leaves of three, let it be.” I lived on military bases and in the suburbs as a child and thought I was immune to poison ivy until we moved to Gloucester 20 years ago. During the first spring, my husband and I both came into contact with the toxic oil called urushiol, which is secreted by all parts of the poison ivy plant. We spent two weeks itching and whining and have suffered at least once each year ever since.

According to the Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 426-109, poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), poison oak (*Toxicodendron pubescens*), and poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) are all found in Virginia, although poison ivy is predominant. Poison ivy grows as a vine or small shrub in fields, woods, gardens, and flower beds. It climbs houses, barns, outbuildings, and trees, often twining among English ivy and other vines. Green, pointed, smooth or toothed leaves grow in groups of three leaflets on tough, reddish-brown vines.

Poison oak, more common on the West Coast, is a small shrub, with oak-shaped leaves, also growing in groups of three leaflets. In eastern Virginia, it is found in dry areas. Poison sumac is a small tree that grows in swampy areas, particularly in states that border the Mississippi River.

How do you avoid getting poison ivy rash? Wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, gloves, and boots. If you sweat, change and wash your clothes, as urushiol can penetrate wet clothing. Ivy block products on the market may help prevent the rash from developing. Look before you weed or dig. Clean tools and gloves after use. Bathe pets that may have wandered into the vines. Never burn poison ivy plants; urushiol is carried in the smoke and can affect skin or lungs. Urushiol is secreted throughout the year, so you can be affected even in the coldest part of winter.

What should you do if you accidentally get into poison ivy? Wash the affected areas with soap and cool to lukewarm water within 30 minutes and change and wash your clothes. You can spread the oil to someone else by skin-to-skin contact, but the fluid from poison ivy blisters is not toxic.

What does poison ivy rash look like and what can I do to ease discomfort? The rash varies from person to person, but includes redness, swelling, and itchy blisters. Scratching the blisters can introduce bacterial infection. Cool compresses and tepid baking soda or colloidal oatmeal baths will soothe the itching, as will over the counter anti-itch creams containing steroids or antihistamines. A trip to the emergency room is warranted for difficulty breathing, excessive

swelling, or rash covering most of the body. Helpful online articles can be found at mayoclinic.com, Medline Plus, and the American Academy of Dermatology.

Neighbors and fellow Master Gardeners have commented on an abundance of large-leaved poison ivy this year. WebMD reported the preliminary results of two recent studies by a researcher from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and researchers from Duke University, which indicate that increased levels of carbon dioxide related to climate change are causing the growth of bigger poison ivy plants that secrete more toxic urushiol. This effect is likely to continue as carbon dioxide levels increase.

VCE recommends killing poison ivy plants with a mixture of herbicides containing glyphosate, dicamba, or triclopyr. These are toxic chemicals and package instructions should be followed. Unfortunately, home-made herbicides won't kill poison ivy.

Since the future of poison ivy appears to be bigger, more toxic plants, we need to use care when weeding and pruning, and consider investing in a company that manufactures calamine lotion.

August 13, 2015