

Toxicodendron Travails: Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac

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Figure 1 Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, Poison Sumac. Credit: Cook (2012); Larry Korhnak, UF/IFAS

Florida is no stranger to dangerous plants and wildlife, and if you are unfamiliar with our flora, it would be wise to familiarize yourself with some of the most common toxic plants. Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac are all native to our area of northeast Florida, and they share the same toxic substance: urushiol. Urushiol is an oil that can cause a rash when it contacts our skin or lung irritation if vapors are inhaled from burning plant material.



Figure 2: Poison Ivy leaflet. Credit Larry Korhnak, UF/IFAS

Poison Ivy

Poison Ivy, *Toxicodendron radicans*, abounds in sun or shade and anywhere in between. It is an important food source for native birds and an essential component in our ecosystem; however, humans may have an adverse reaction to contact with its oils. Once you learn the basic identifying factors, spotting it becomes second nature and can help prevent unnecessary contact.

Poison Ivy grows in various forms, including sprawling vine, climbing vine, and woody shrub. Leaflet length can vary among plants, from 2 to 6 inches long, however they are always in groups of three, hence the saying, “leaflets of three, let it be”. Its 3 leaflets and hairy vine are unmistakable identifying characteristics. Leaflets can have smooth or toothed edges and emerge in the spring with a reddish tinge on the edges of its glossy foliage. As the seasons progress, the leaves fade to a duller green, then reddish in the fall before entering winter dormancy. Berries are green to white with a waxy white coating. All parts of this plant are poisonous year-round, even when

dormant. The stem, leaves, berries, and aerial roots (which resemble a hairy vine) all contain urushiol.

Poison Oak

Poison Oak, *Toxicodendron pubescens*, thrives in dry, sunny locations but not heavy shade, so keep be cautious when walking through open fields. Poison Oak grows as a shrub approximately 3 foot tall, and, like Poison Ivy, produces leaflets of 3. The leaves are lobed, resembling an oak leaf, and covered in fine hairs. Leaf length can vary up to 6 inches. Leaves emerge in the spring with a reddish hue that turns to green, followed by red and yellow shades in the fall. Fruit is tan and waxy and favored by birds such as woodpeckers.



Figure 3: Poison Oak leaflets

Poison Sumac

Poison Sumac, *Toxicodendron vernix*, is a woody shrub or small tree growing from 5 to 20 feet tall, and can be found in swamps, pine woods, and shady hardwood forests. Its leaves consist of 7-13 smooth leaflets that are arranged in pairs, with the odd numbered leaflet at the top of the midrib. Red stems and petioles are distinctive identifying characteristics for Poison Sumac. Leaflets have a velvety texture and emerge bright orange in spring. They morph to a dark, glossy green on top with a

paler underside, followed by a bright orange-red in autumn. Clusters of white to gray fruits hang about a foot long from the branches. Poison Sumac is not toxic to wildlife, and is favored by bobwhite, rabbits, grouse and pheasants.

If you do happen to come in contact with the oils of these plants while gardening or hiking, immediately wash your skin with warm soapy water followed by a cool water rinse to remove the oils and prevent them from spreading to other parts of your body. Oils can remain on gardening tools, so it is important to wash them as well so you don't touch the oils the next time you reach for your gloves or pruners.



Figure 4: Poison sumac leaflets, reddish stems, and immature green fruit. Credit: Larry Korhnak, UF/IFAS

Reference: Identification of Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, Poison Sumac, and Poisonwood:

<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/publication/EP220>