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Poison ivy in many forms

You may have heard the phrase “leaves of three, let it be” when looking out for poison ivy. While this is a handy saying, identifying poison ivy can be harder than that. While we mainly think of poison ivy as a shrub we see growing in garden beds or in woodlands, it actually comes in various forms: erect woody shrub, climbing woody vine and as a groundcover. To further complicate identification, the leaves of poison ivy can also vary.

In the vining habit, aerial roots give the vines a fuzzy, rope-like appearance. These roots will be thin, hairy, and dense as they hold the vine to the tree. These vines will climb trees and go high into the air. As a groundcover, the leaves remain smaller, and are sometimes overlooked. This form of poison ivy is often confused with Virginia creeper or Woodbine (both of which have 5 leaves). Poison ivy can also be a low, upright shrub. These shrubs can appear in fields, pastures, woods or even the home garden.

There is also some variation in the leaves of poison ivy. Leaf margins may be toothed, incised, lobed or smooth. The leaves start out shiny and green, but over the course of the growing season turn red or yellow.

This might make it sound impossible to identify, but there are a few key identifiers. The leaves, for example, follow the old saying and will always be in groups of three at the end of a stem. While the leaves vary, the middle leaf will have a longer stem and be a larger size. The other two leaves are closely attached to the petiole (leaf stem) and slightly smaller. In the summer and fall you may also see clusters of green-white berries. If you see a plant matching this description, you can assume it is poison ivy.

For vines, look for the hairy, aerial roots. Even after leaves die back in the fall, the vines can still cause an allergic reaction.

To eradicate poison ivy, begin by covering your body with pants, long sleeves and gloves. Once finished, wash all your clothing and your body to remove any traces of the plant's toxins. In the ground cover form, direct spray or grubbing (digging) are common strategies for removal. Make sure the soil is moist before grubbing out the plants including the root systems.

Direct spray is a common control method for poison ivy in the shrub form. Triclopyr (Brush-B-Gon Poison Ivy Killer, Brush Killer Stump Killer) is popular for poison ivy control. Glyphosate (Roundup; Killzall Weed and Grass Killer; Nutgrass, Poison Ivy and Vine Killer) or dicamba are also effective herbicides for this purpose. For woody vines of poison ivy, cut the plant off at the base and treat the emerging sprouts with herbicide when they appear.

Repeat applications of herbicide are usually necessary as this can be a tough plant.