

THE OUTSIDER

Illinois Extension Horticulture serving Henry, Mercer, Rock Island, and Stark



WHEN PLANTS FIGHT BACK

As outsiders, whether extremely comfortable in the outdoors or just starting to explore, it is important to respect nature. Sometimes this means hiking a trail and leaving no trace, sometimes that means giving wild animals their space, and sometimes that means being able to identify and avoid plants that will cause harm to people and/or animals. Whether hiking through the woods, gardening in our backyard, or playing at a local park, some of the plants growing in these spaces have the potential to cause people harm. Proper identification in avoidance of these plants is recommended for safety and continued enjoyment of the great outdoors.

POISON IVY (*TOXICODENDRON RADICANS*)

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is a perennial, woody plant common to Illinois. Poison ivy grows as a low shrub or vine climbing on nearby plant materials or structures. Widely spread, poison ivy can be found in woodlands, roadside ditches, pastures, windbreaks, fence rows, community parks, and more.

Poison ivy has compound leaves made of three leaflets arranged alternately on the stem. While there is variability in leaf shape, the middle leaflet is typically larger in size than the two side leaflets. Side leaflets are said to have 'thumbs' which are actually exaggerated serrations. Poison ivy leaf margins can have serrations but may also be smooth or lobed which means identification requires practice.

Poison ivy produces small, greenish-white blossoms in early summer. These blossoms develop into small, white berries in late summer. Birds feed on these berries and help transport the seeds from place to place through droppings, thereby spreading poison ivy.

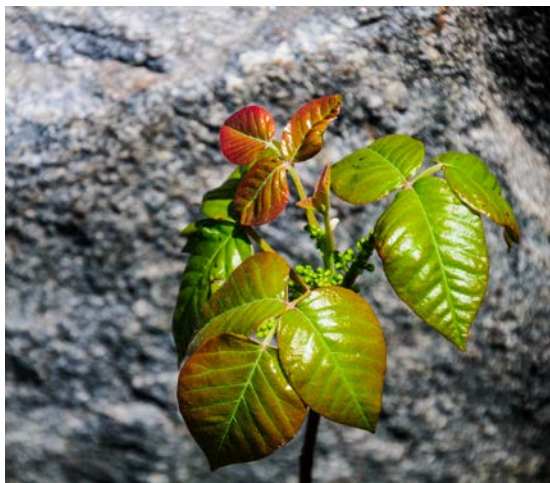


All parts of the plant (leaves, stem, and roots) produce urushiol oil which can cause a skin reaction. Severe itching, inflammation, and blisters may result if a person encounters the oil. Tools and materials that come into contact with the oil are capable of spreading the oil to people causing a reaction. Care must be taken with yard tools, clothing, shoes or boots, and pets that may be transporting the oil. Urushiol oil within dead poison ivy plants remains reactive for two years. If plants are burnt, the oil is vaporized and can cause severe respiratory reactions if inhaled.

If contact is made with poison ivy, wash the exposed skin immediately with regular soap under cold, running water. According to the Mayo Clinic, the itching sensation caused by poison ivy reactions can be treated with a topical over-the-counter cortisone cream or ointment or with calamine lotion or creams containing menthol. Oral antihistamines may also provide relief.

Commonly Mistaken:

Plants that can be commonly mistaken for poison ivy include box elder (*Acer nigrum*) and common blackberry (*Rubus allegheniensis*) as they have similar leaves. To differentiate the species, look for these characteristics: Box elder leaves are oppositely arranged while poison ivy is alternate; and common blackberry can be distinguished from poison ivy by identifying the spines or thorns on the stems.



Seasonal variations of poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) leaves. Red coloration may appear at the beginning of the growing season but is more pronounced in the autumn.



WILD PARSNIP (*PASTINACA SATIVA*)

Wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*) is a member of the carrot family and is related to cultivated parsnips. Although related, wild parsnip should be avoided. This herbaceous biennial can be found in open fields, pastures, roadsides, and prairies.

In their first year of growth, wild parsnip seedlings form a rosette of pinnately compound leaves arranged in pairs along the stalk of the plant. Floral stalks emerge as 2- to 5-foot-high yellow umbel-shaped flowers mid-summer. If left unmanaged, hundreds of seeds are produced and can readily spread into adjacent landscapes.

Like other members of the carrot family, the roots of wild parsnip are edible however the plant produces a compound in its sap that can cause skin irritations if skin contact is made while exposed to the sun. The compound known as furanocoumarin is contained in all above-ground plant material and causes phytophotodermatitis, a chemical burn resulting from exposed skin being made more sensitive to sunlight. Intense burning, rash formation, blistering, and skin discoloration can result in the short-term aftermath of exposure. Long-term sensitivity to sunlight may remain for up to two years.

Avoid contact with the plant, especially in sunlight. Long sleeves and pants should be worn to protect skin from contact. Cover the exposed skin immediately if contact is made to minimize the chances of sun exposure and reaction. Wash the affected area with soap and warm water. If blisters begin to develop, cover the area with a cool, damp cloth to help reduce pain and discomfort. Keep the affected area out of sunlight to avoid worsening the condition. If burns are severe, professional medical advice should be sought.

Commonly Mistaken:

Blooms of wild parsnip resemble the blooms of Queen Anne's Lace (*Daucus carota*) in size, shape, and height. They can be distinguished based on an earlier bloom time and the golden floral color of wild parsnip color compared to the white, late summer blooms of Queen Anne's Lace.

Golden Alexander (*Zizia aurea*) can be mistaken for wild parsnip. Golden Alexander is a native and will not cause skin irritation. Golden Alexander is smaller and shorter than wild parsnip topping out at three feet. Golden Alexander blooms earlier in the year, between April and June, as compared to wild parsnip's blooms in mid-summer.



Wild parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*)



STINGING NETTLE

Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is an herbaceous, single-stem perennial. Common in the Illinois landscape, stinging nettle can be found in moist woodlands, floodplains, ditches, fence rows, and gardens. Sites with moist, fertile, disturbed ground create preferred growing conditions for stinging nettle.

Stinging nettles produce hairs along the length of the stem known as nettles that will inject an irritation causing acid into the skin. If contact is made with these hairs, a burning or itching sensation is experienced but is typically short-lived. Blistering rashes are rare following contact with stinging nettle. The best defense against nettle is avoiding contact. Visual identification and physical avoidance of the plant as well as long sleeve shirts and pants prevent contact between plants and skin.

Commonly Mistaken:

Wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*) is native to the northern half of Illinois and will cause the same skin irritation. Nettle is a valuable source of food for Eastern Comma (*Polygonia comma*), Question Mark (*Polygonia interrogationis*), and Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*) butterfly caterpillars and moth caterpillars of Large Bomolocha (*Bomolocha edictalis*) and Sordid Bomolocha (*Bomolocha sordidula*). Honey bees use the flowers for food. Nettle has been used by indigenous cultures for food, medicine, dyes, and fibers for centuries.

Wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*) can be mistaken for stinging nettle. Differentiation can be made by looking at the leaf arrangement. The lower leaves of wood nettle are arranged alternately, while the upper leaves are organized in an opposite arrangement. Stinging nettle leaves are opposite along the entire length of the stem.



Stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*)

OUTSIDER ACTION

Try these activities to be more of an Outsider:

- Become familiar with these plants, look for them, and avoid them.
- Teach friends and family about these plants, and help keep them safe.

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