

# Weed Control

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## Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans* L.)



### Identification

Poison ivy is a woody vine with compound leaves comprised of three leaflets. The margins of the leaflets may be either smooth, toothed, or lobed. The plant produces clusters of small, green flowers in June or July. The fruit are small, white berries. Many bird species use the seed as a food source, and thus spread seed to new areas.

Poison ivy grows in a variety of habitats, but is most commonly found on the edges of wooded areas. Plants may occur as erect shrubs or as vines climbing trees, fences, or buildings. The vines produce aerial rootlets that tightly attach to structures. In addition to seed, the plant reproduces by creeping rootstocks. The spreading roots can extend for several yards from the parent plant.

Virginia creeper has a similar growth habit and frequents the same habitats as poison ivy, but is easily distinguished from poison ivy because it has five leaflets instead of three. Poison oak is not found in Iowa; it is limited to the West Coast.

### Conditions of poisoning

Poison ivy is responsible for more than 2 million cases of skin poisoning each year. The toxin causes inflammation and swelling, accompanied by painful irritation and blisters. Symptoms usually occur within 12 to 24 hours after contact with the plant, but sometimes may not appear until 3 to 4 days after exposure.

The toxin is an oily compound present in all parts of the plant. The toxin retains its potency even after plants have been killed. The oil can be carried on clothing, tools, pets, and in smoke, and it retains its toxicity for long periods.

Most people do not respond to the toxin the first time they contact the plant, but they become more sensitive with repeated exposures. Sensitivity to poison ivy varies among individuals, and children are usually more susceptible than adults.



Poison ivy in an early growth stage. Note the clusters of three leaves and the varying shapes of the leaf edges.

## Control methods

Poison ivy can be controlled either mechanically or with herbicides. Only persons with known tolerance should attempt to remove plants physically. Small plants can be controlled by completely removing the root system. Mechanical removal may not be feasible with larger plants due to the extensive root system. Avoid burning plants because the toxin is carried in smoke.

Mowing or physical removal of the shoots is effective against seedling plants; however, established plants require repeated mowing due to resprouting from the established rootstocks.

Several herbicides are available that provide effective control of poison ivy. Due to the extensive root system, repeat applications often are required to provide complete control of established plants. Care must be used when applying any herbicide to ensure that they do not contact desirable plants growing in the vicinity of the poison ivy. Remember to always read and follow label directions for any pesticide.

**Glyphosate** Glyphosate is sold as Roundup, Kleenup, and several other trade names. It is nonselective and kills or injures any green plants it contacts. It is safe to spray poison ivy climbing on trees as long as only the bark of the desirable tree is contacted. Turfgrasses are sensitive to glyphosate and are killed if glyphosate is used to control poison ivy growing in grassy areas. Glyphosate does not have soil activity, thus desirable plants growing in the treated area do not absorb the chemical from the soil.

Poison ivy is most susceptible in late spring after the leaves have fully expanded but before the plant flowers. Glyphosate is usually sprayed on the foliage of plants, but it also can be used as a cut-surface stem treatment. This treatment is especially well-suited for mature plants climbing on trees or other structures. The stem should be cut near the soil surface and then a concentrated solution of glyphosate is painted onto the cut surface of the stem. The herbicide reduces resprouting from the root system.

**Growth regulator herbicides** Several herbicides in this class of compounds can be used for poison ivy control, including 2,4-D; 2,4-DP (dichlorprop); dicamba; and triclopyr. Commercial products usually contain a combination of two or three of these chemicals and are sold under a variety of trade names. Products containing 2,4-DP or triclopyr generally are more effective on woody plants such as poison ivy than 2,4-D or dicamba.

Growth regulator herbicides do not kill grasses in treated areas when used at appropriate rates. These chemicals are moderately persistent in the soil and can be absorbed by roots extending into the treated area. Follow all precautions on the product label to avoid injury to desirable plants.



Be careful of poison ivy vines. Contact with them may give the same result as contact with the leaves.

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