

BOTANY
NATURE RAMBLINGS
by Frank Thone



Treacherous Triad

► POISON IVY season is with us again. Just when it gets to be really nice weather for picnicking, and the kids look forward to hikes in the country and perhaps a summer camp, once school is out, this three-leaved enemy of the human epidermis reaches its fullest, most malignant development. Only the drier parts of the country, from the High

Plains to the crest of the Sierra and Cascades, are free from this ill weed and its almost identical twin, the West Coast poison oak.

What to do about poison ivy? If you know you are sensitive to it, the very best remedy is not to have anything to do with it. The plant is easy to identify; a vine climbing tree trunks, stone walls and the like with myriads of aerial roots, or a gray-barked, sparsely-branched shrub, with glossy, three-parted leaves. The old warning jingle, "Leaflets three, let it be," is perfectly good field botany so far as poison ivy and poison oak are concerned.

Margins of the leaflets may be deeply lobed, shallowly notched, or altogether smooth. Poison ivy is an exceedingly variable species, and you can often find considerable differences among the leaves on the same plant. The effort, sometimes made on the basis of leaf shape, to set apart an Eastern "poison oak" from poison ivy is futile: there are just too many transition shapes among the leaves.

Poison-ivy flowers are loose clusters of tiny, greenish-white bloom; the berries change from green to pallid gray-

white in autumn. Curiously enough, some birds seem to be able to eat them with impunity.

If you *must* go where there is poison ivy, a preventive treatment that protects most persons can be made by dissolving about a teaspoonful of ferrous sulfate (copperas) in a pint of half-and-half mixture of alcohol and water, and adding a little glycerin. Spread this on exposed portions of the skin and let it dry without wiping. Curative properties are also claimed for this mixture; but prevention is always better than cure.

About two persons in three are sufficiently sensitive to poison ivy to suffer after-effects from contact with it. The lucky remaining third either develop few and inconsequential blisters, or even handle the pesky weed with as much impunity as if it were so much grass or spinach. Such fortunates should, however, remember two things: (1) it is always possible to lose that immunity, without notice; (2) if they do heroically pull up a patch they should immediately rinse their hands in rubbing alcohol or wash them with strong soap, for subsequent contacts with non-immune persons can transfer the poison to them.

Science News Letter, May 11, 1946

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