



The Unholy Trinity

► ST. PATRICK, tradition tells, explaining the doctrine of the Trinity to the puzzled Irish chieftain, plucked the first trifoliate leaf his eye lighted on, to show how the same being could be three and yet one.

Had the great missionary been laboring among American Indians instead of among the Irish, he might a little later have had cause to wonder over blistered, itching fingers, whether his illustration had been well chosen. For one of the most common trifoliate-leaved plants in North America is poison ivy, which (as any of its victims will tell you) is decidedly more satanic than divine in its connotations.

That trifoliate structure of the leaf is the one constant feature of poison ivy, by which it can be recognized—and shunned—wherever it grows. Everything else about the plant is variable: it may be a tall shrub, up to your shoulders, or it may be a growth no more than shoe-top high. Again, it may be a slender vine clinging to tree trunks and stone fences with myriads of aerial roots, or (in Florida hammocks) a veritable tropical liana with a trunk as thick as your leg.

There is certainly no constancy to the outline of the leaflets themselves, either in the poison ivy proper of the Eastern states or in its cousin, the poison oak of the Far West. There may be a few coarse notches or teeth, or deeper, wavy lobes, or the margins may be completely smooth and unbroken. The leaflets themselves are usually ovate in general shape, but they may be so broad as to be almost round or narrow enough to be called oblong. And just to make it more interesting, you can often find several markedly different shapes of leaves on the same plant!

The same plant, too, may be shrub and vine at the same time. This paradox is attained through the habit of the main stem, which runs along barely under the soil surface, sending up shrubby branches at close intervals, so that what may appear to be a clump or row of poison-ivy shrubs is very likely to be simply the branches of one vine-like underground stem or rootstock. Then, without warning, the same horizontal stem may suddenly turn vertically upward, climbing the trunk of a tree and becoming a perfectly orthodox vine.

Latest methods of preventing and treating poison ivy have been summarized from medical reports in a bulletin just compiled by Science Service. The bulletin gives formulas for two protective ointments for use by those who expect to be exposed to poison ivy. In addition it tells about a new method which doctors treating ivy poisoning may wish to try. The bulletin will be sent for two three-cent stamps accompanying requests addressed to Science Service, 1719 N St., N. W., Washington 6, D. C. Science News Letter, June 5, 1943



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