BOTANY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone

See and Shun!

➤ POISON IVY victims begin to become numerous at about this time of year, and they will continue so until frost strips the wicked vine of its foliage. It is sometimes stated that poison ivy is at its most virulent when in bloom; but most of the afflicted ones can find no seasonal differences in their miseries. Just as many blisters and as much itching in August as in May, they declare.

The malaise of ivy poisoning—ranging from relatively mild discomfort in some to acute and prolonged suffering in the more sensitive—can be largely obviated by attention to a few simple precautions. As in all afflictions, prevention is better than cure, and avoidance of the cause is the key to prevention. Learn to recognize poison ivy at sight, and keep away from it whenever you see it, and you will reduce the number of attacks per season—perhaps eliminate them altogether.

Poison ivy is easily recognizable by its three-parted compound leaf. It is the only abundant shrubby plant in the woods with that kind of leaf. Flowers are small, greenish-white, thickly clustered; they are followed by berries that become a slightly soiled parchment-white when ripe.

For the Eastern species, there is no valid distinction between poison ivy and poison oak, which is sometimes attempted on the basis of leaflet-shape. Leaflet margins range all the way from entire to deeply notched or lobed—sometimes on different parts of the same vine. Poison ivy is an exceedingly variable species. The name poison oak is properly applied to the Western species, which is plentiful in the foothills of coastal mountain ranges, and is also found less abundantly inland.

Properly speaking, poison ivy is a vine. In humid woodlands it climbs trees and clambers over rocks and stone fences, clinging by means of innumerable aerial roots. In slightly drier terrain, it disguises its character by running the main stem of the vine along or just under the ground surface, sending up numerous branches that range from a few inches to four or five feet in height, so that it is often described as a shrub. But it's all the same old pesky poison ivy.

Several hundreds of remedies for ivy poisoning have been proposed, almost all of them completely worthless. A few years ago U. S. Public Health Service scientists developed an ointment containing 10% sodium perborate and 2% potassium periodate in a cold cream base, which is said to be very effective in most cases.

There is also a good preventive treatment, which persons who know themselves to be susceptible can put on before going into the woods. It consists simply of a 5% solution of ferrous sulfate in a half-and-half mixture of water and ethyl alcohol; a little glycerin may be added to keep it from feeling too dry as it evaporates on the skin.

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