Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday

Leaves of Three—Leave It Be

You have probably heard "leaves of three, leave it be" since childhood. This old saying refers to a couple of poisonous plants frequently found in Florida’s parks and woodlands areas. Poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac are the most common cause of allergic reactions in the United States. Every year 10 to 50 million Americans develop severe skin dermatitis after contact with these poisonous plants.

Approximately 85 percent of the population will develop an allergic reaction if exposed to poison ivy, oak or sumac, according to the American Academy of Dermatology. Poisoning results from contact with a chemical in the plant’s sap called urushiol (pronounced oo-roo-shee-ohl). Contact with urushiol can occur in three ways.

The most common way is through direct contact by touching the sap of a poisonous plant. A second route is through indirect contact, touching something contaminated with urushiol. Contaminated clothes, sports equipment, gardening tools and animal fur can carry the urushiol oil. The third way of contacting the oil is through airborne contact. Burning these poisonous plants can release urushiol particles into the air.

Identifying poisonous plants is the first step in avoiding allergic reactions. Parents should teach their children how to recognize and avoid these plants in the wild. The saying “leaves of three, leave it be” is a good rule of thumb but only partially correct. Poison ivy and poison oak have leaves with three leaflets. Poison sumac leaves however consist of many leaflets.

Poison ivy (Rhus radicans) has many different forms and can be confused with other plants. It is usually a woody shrub or vine. It can grow vertically on trees, walls and fences or horizontally along paths. Although the shape of the leaves can vary, even on the same plant, the typical leaf consists of three leaflets on a long stalk. The leaves alternate up the stem. Poison ivy does produce white, waxy berries.

Poison oak (Rhus toxicodendron) is most frequently found as a low growing shrub. It does not usually grow as a vine. The leaves are similar to poison ivy but the leaflets are lobed, resembling the lobed leaves of some oaks.

Poison sumac (Rhus vernix) grows as a woody shrub or a small tree. While the tree may reach 25 feet, it is usually five to six feet tall. A poison sumac leaf consists of seven to 13 leaflets, which are three to four inches long and one to two inches wide. Leaflets are arranged in pairs with a single leaflet at the terminal end of the leaf. This plant is easiest to recognize in the fall because it turns a beautiful red-orange color. Poison sumac has several names including swamp sumac, poison elder, poison ash, poison dogwood and thunderwood. It is found most commonly in swamps and bogs.

Poison oak and ivy rarely occur in a lawn because repeated mowing kills the roots. In landscape beds and wooded areas, repeatedly cutting back the plant to the ground will eventually eradicate the problem.
Herbicides containing the active ingredient glyphosate can also be used. This systemic product is translocated throughout the leaves, stems and roots when applied to the foliage. Repeated sprays may be required. Other herbicides that can be used to control these poisonous plants are often called “brush killers” and contain the active ingredient triclopyr. Regardless of the herbicide chosen, be sure to follow the label directions carefully.

Poison ivy vines growing up trees require a different approach. Cut the vines two to three feet from the ground. Several weeks later, after the base of the vine has regrown, spray it with a glyphosate herbicide. Repeat the spray each time new growth is seen. Several applications are usually needed in order to control such mature plants.
Theresa Friday is the Extension Faculty in Environmental Horticulture for Santa Rosa County. Extension Service programs are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin.

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