

Identifying Plants Can Be Tricky

By Larry Caplan, Extension Horticulture Educator, Vanderburgh County, IN

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I've had many people contacting me to help them identify various plants and vines in their yards this year. While I get these questions year-round, the calls and emails this year seem to revolve around whether the plant is poisonous or not.

The plant that poses the biggest danger to the majority of residents at this time of year is poison ivy. All parts of this plant contain an oil, called urushiol, which can cause a nasty skin rash (dermatitis) on sensitive people. It is estimated that between 70 and 85 percent will develop a rash upon contact with the plant.

Poison ivy is sometimes tricky to identify, because it grows in different forms. It can be a low-growing groundcover; it can form a shrub up to four feet tall; and it can form a vine that climbs trees, fences, and other structures. The vines develop reddish hair-like rootlets, which allow it to cling onto trees and other structures.

All forms have leaves which have an alternate arrangement on the stems. The leaves are compound, with three leaflets per cluster ("Leaves of three, let it be!"). The leaves may be light to dark green; shiny or dull; smooth-edged or with teeth. It grows throughout shaded areas, especially along the edges of woods.

One plant that is often mistaken for poison ivy is Virginia creeper. The key identification feature for this plant is that each of its compound leaves have five leaflets, not the three we find with poison ivy. While most people can handle Virginia creeper with no ill effects, a small percentage are sensitive to the sap, and can develop a rash similar to that caused by poison ivy.

There are numerous other common garden and landscape plants that can cause dermatitis in sensitive people...too many to list here. If you need a list, especially if you wish to be tested by allergist, just contact my office.

One of the more difficult identification questions I get is about mushrooms. While there are many edible mushrooms that can be collected locally, it is very dangerous to eat anything growing wild that you haven't positively identified. To the untrained eye, the poisonous mushrooms can easily be confused with edible ones.

However, we have a couple of training programs coming up in July that might help mushroom hunters. On Friday, July 8, there will be a Mushroom Foray at Wesselman Woods Nature Preserve, starting at 6 pm. Steve Russell of the Hoosier Mushroom Society will lead a tour through the preserve and teach visitors how to identify some of the common edible mushrooms found during the summer. This program will cost \$15 per person, plus entry fee to enter the preserve. For serious collectors who wish to sell their harvest, Steve will lead a Mushroom Certification program on Saturday, July 9, also at the Nature Preserve; this program will cost \$125/person. I'll have more on these programs in the next couple of weeks.

For more information on plant identification and poisonous plants, contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287.



Poison ivy leaf. This is a compound leaf made up of 3 leaflets. Notice how the leaves are alternately arranged on the stem (one leaf attaches to the stem at one spot, and then another leaf attaches further down the stem).



Virginia creeper has 5 leaflets per compound leaf.