

Ask a Master Gardener

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By Nancy Dombrowsky

Vice President, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Thunderwood???

I was standing on the edge of a wooded lot talking to the workmen who were clearing the lot for a house. As I looked around I saw that the poison ivy was green and healthy. When I pointed it out, I was told that the workmen didn't worry about poison ivy as much as they worried about "Thunderwood". What exactly is thunderwood?

My initial response was "Huh". As you can tell I am a very articulate person. We don't have Thunderwood in Pennsylvania so I went home to look it up. Surprise, surprise!! It is known to the rest of the country as Poison Sumac.

This is the time of year when it is important to reacquaint ourselves and our families with "THE BIG THREE" – Poison Oak, Poison Ivy and Poison Sumac. All three produce a toxic oily compound known as urushiol. It is contained within resin ducts in the plant and is released quickly when the plant is crushed, bruised or damaged in any way. As we walk through the woods, we bruise the plant and the toxin oozes out.

Our pets can also transfer it to us as they explore the woods and pick it up on their fur. A friend of mine has poison ivy on both of her arms. She picked up her cat who had just come in from exploring the woods at the back of her yard. I got poison ivy on my neck and chin one winter. There were no leaves on the plants but my dog still managed to bring it home on her fur. It is important to remember that all parts of "The Big Three", including the hairy-looking aerial roots, contain urushiol at all times of the year, even when there are no leaves and fruit in winter. You can also come in contact with the oil from equipment or clothing that has brushed up against the plants so be sure you wash everything with soap and water.

Poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*) is a common poisonous plant in Georgia. It is a woody perennial that lives in moist areas of forests and wooded areas; but it is also found in fields, pastures, fence rows and ornamental plantings, so it grows just about anywhere. It also is a master of disguise. We think of it as a low growing ground cover but it can grow as a small shrub or as a climbing vine. It reproduces using seeds but also has creeping roots so that new plants can show up several yards away from the parent plant. The shape and texture of the leaves is also highly variable. One thing is consistent; the leaves always consist of three leaflets, one terminal leaflet and two that are opposite each other. Leaves are shiny with a reddish tinge in the spring. They turn a dull green with age, and become shades of red or purple in the fall. The old adage "Leaves of three, let it be." is a good rule to follow.

Poison oak (*Rhus toxicodendron*) is relative of poison ivy. It is a low-growing, upright shrub that is found in dry, sunny locations. It does not tolerate heavy shade. Like poison ivy, the poison oak leaf consists of three leaflets. One distinguishing feature of poison oak is its lobed leaves, which give it the appearance of an oak leaf. Leaf size varies considerably but leaves are generally about 6 inches long. Another distinguishing feature is that the leaf stems and leaflets have a coating of fine hair. The leaves have a reddish tinge in the spring, turn green in summer, and become varying shades of yellow and red in the

fall. It has clusters of small white flowers and round, light tan, waxy fruit. The “Leaves of three, let it be.” can be applied to poison oak as well.

Poison Sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) known locally as “Thunderwood” can cause a more intense allergic reaction than poison ivy or poison oak. It is a deciduous woody shrub or small tree that grows 5–20 feet tall. It can be found in swamps and other wet areas, pine woods, and shady hardwood forests. The leaves consist of 7–13 leaflets arranged in pairs with a single leaflet at the end. The features include reddish stems and leaflets that have smooth margins. The leaves are bright orange in early spring, dark green and glossy on the upper leaf surface and pale green on the underside in the summer. They turn bright red-orange or russet in the fall. Poison sumac has clusters of small, yellowish-green flowers and ivory-white to gray fruits resemble poison oak or poison ivy.

Remember, your clothes can transfer the urushiol to your furniture so take them off and wash them immediately. If you come in contact with any part of the plants, washing your skin with soap and water will work only if you can do it within 30 minutes of exposure. Sensitivity varies among individuals but symptoms of inflammation and blistering usually occur within 12 to 48 hours.

There are several ways to get rid of these poisonous plants. Regular mowing will eliminate the plant from your lawn. Digging out the plants and roots is an easy way to get rid of a small patch. Just remember to wear waterproof gloves. Herbicides that contains either glyphosate or 2,4-D can be applied. They are most effective when the plant is fully leafed out. Whatever you do to control these pesky plants, DO NOT BURN THEM! The toxin can be carried on soot particles in the smoke and cause severe allergic reactions especially if inhaled.

Enjoy the time you spend outdoors but be aware of the plants around you. You can find more information and pictures of “The Big Three” at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/ep220>.

For additional details or more information, you can contact us for questions about any gardening issues; contact a Master Gardener volunteer at the UGA Cooperative Extension Carroll County Office at 900 Newnan Road, Carrollton at 770-836-8546 or via email at ccmg@uga.edu. Or for any other details go to <http://www.ugaextension.com/carroll/anr/MasterGardenerPage.html>