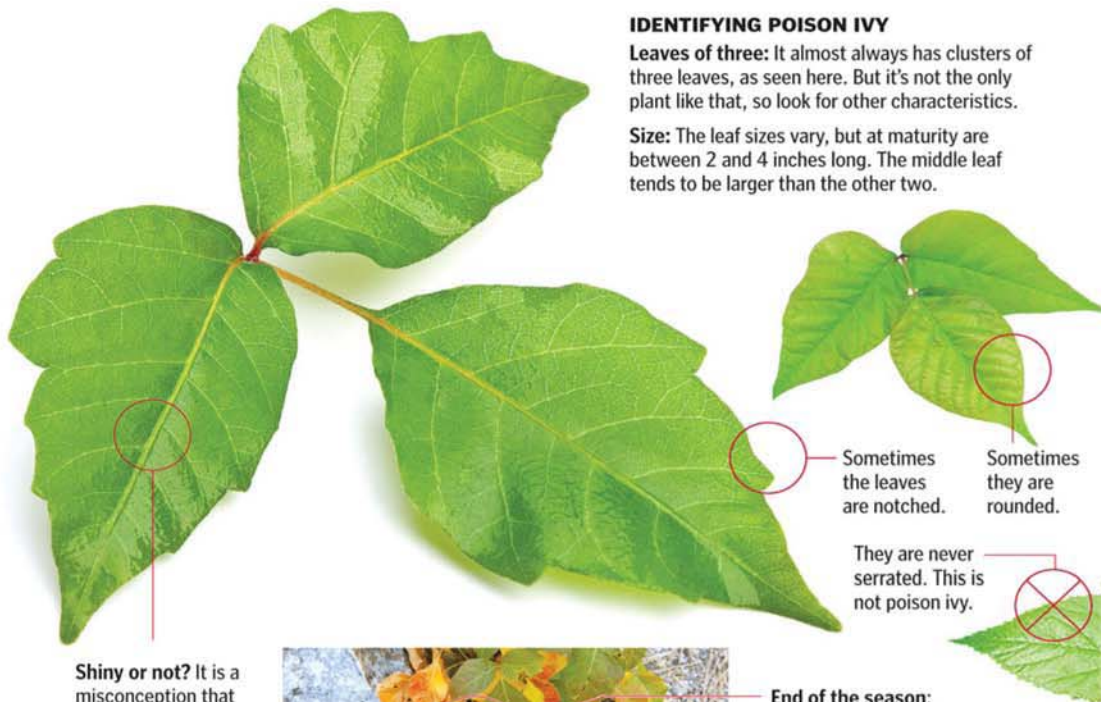


The Boston Globe

FRIDAY, AUGUST 13, 2010

Watch out, it's everywhere



IDENTIFYING POISON IVY

Leaves of three: It almost always has clusters of three leaves, as seen here. But it's not the only plant like that, so look for other characteristics.

Size: The leaf sizes vary, but at maturity are between 2 and 4 inches long. The middle leaf tends to be larger than the other two.

Sometimes the leaves are notched.

Sometimes they are rounded.

They are never serrated. This is not poison ivy.

Shiny or not? It is a misconception that poison ivy leaves are always shiny. They are often dull.



End of the season: The leaves will turn red or orange in the fall, but remain poisonous even after falling from the plant.

HOW DO YOU GET IT?

Oil secreted by the plant causes an allergic reaction leading to itchy rashes of varying severity.

Direct contact: Touching any part of the plant with bare skin including leaves, stems, and roots.

Indirect contact: Don't touch anything that came in contact with the plants, like clothing or pets.



IF YOU TOUCH IT

Remove oils: Within an hour, rinse with lots of cold water. Do not use hot water initially. Try wiping exposed areas with alcohol.

Treatment: Rashes last up to three weeks. Anti-itch creams are available over the counter. See a doctor for severe rashes.

GETTING RID OF IT

Spray leaves with a strong herbicide or carefully cut the stem at the ground. Never yank the plant out by its roots, never use a weed whacker, and never burn it — the smoke is toxic.



Many afflicted by potent poison ivy

By Patrick G. Lee
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

An unusually moist spring and a hot summer have conspired to produce a particularly abundant crop of poison ivy this year, leaving more Massachusetts residents than usual scratching their skin raw.

Scientists believe the plant might also be gaining in potency because, especially in cities, it is thriving on increasing carbon dioxide levels, partly the result of burning fossil fuels and cutting down forests.

Landscapers in the region have reported an increase in house calls about poison ivy, whose clear, liquid oil causes telltale streaks of red skin, rashes, and blisters.

"It's everywhere. It's out in force," said William Bartlett of Bethlehem, Conn., who has removed poison ivy for more than 30 years around Connecticut and Western Massachusetts. "I usually don't get busy until the beginning of June. I was busy since the 10th of April this year."

The exact number of poison ivy cases is hard to track, because many people use over-the-counter creams and sprays to quell the scratching without ever making a trip to the doctor. But sales of ointments commonly used to treat

SOURCES: University of Massachusetts; Jon Sachs, poison-ivy.org
DAVID SCHUTZ / GLOBE STAFF

POISON IVY, Page A20

Poison ivy thrives in long, hot summer

► POISON IVY

Continued from Page A1

poison ivy exposure have increased significantly, according to spokesmen for their manufacturers.

In Greater Boston, purchases of Tecnu Extreme Medicated Poison Ivy Scrub, which is available in every major drugstore chain, are 24 percent higher this year compared with last, with most of the increase over the past few months.

Zanfel Poison Ivy Wash, another widely available option, has seen a 40 percent increase in its Northeast retail sales relative to last summer. Given that there is minimal advertising in the poison ivy product industry, the large changes can be attributed mostly to a greater need for the treatments, said Steve Sisler, vice president of sales at Zanfel Laboratories Inc.

Dr. Richard Zane, vice chairman of emergency medicine at Brigham and Women's Hospital, said he has seen several patients with unusually severe allergic reactions to poison ivy over the past few months, and he expects more such cases will come to the emergency room well into the fall. In the worst cases, patients are treated with steroids to calm the reaction, and some need to be hospitalized.

Zane said one young man had worked an entire day in hot, humid weather, clearing brush from a side yard while wiping sweat from his neck, face, abdomen, and chest.

"It looked like a total upper body surface area burn with blistering, like a horrible drug reaction," Zane said. "He had not been exposed to this degree of poison ivy ever before in his life."

Brookline Village resident Paul Epstein suffered from a par-

ticularly nasty reaction to the plant last year and has since attempted to battle the recurring patch of poison ivy in his backyard, but only after donning head-to-toe protective gear.

Epstein, the associate director of the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, studies the link between climate change and human ailments.

"A lot of moisture, a lot of heat, and the early arrival of spring combined with high levels

**'It's everywhere.
It's out in force.'**

WILLIAM BARTLETT
Landscaper who has been busy removing poison ivy this year

of carbon dioxide — it's a perfect combination of things that create conditions" conducive to the growth of many allergenic plants, including poison ivy, he said.

Lewis Ziska, a plant specialist with the US Department of Agriculture, helped conduct a six-year study of the impact of carbon dioxide levels on poison ivy in a North Carolina forest.

The results, published in 2006, indicated that higher concentrations of carbon dioxide accelerate the growth of all plants, in particular opportunistic weeds like poison ivy. The gas also appears to make the plant's poison more powerful, the study found.

"Urban areas are already at the conditions we project for the rest of the world 30 to 40 years from now," Ziska said. "The temperature in an urban environment is already warmer than in a surrounding area, and carbon

dioxide is already higher."

That makes cities optimal places to host bigger and more poisonous infestations of the plant, Ziska said.

He has spotted poison ivy in Manhattan, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston. City dwellers who frequent parks or live by wooded areas should watch out for the plant's trademark trio of leaves, which are found on a shrub, vine, or ground cover.

Randy Prostack, a weeds scientist with the University of Massachusetts Extension in Amherst, said he advises people to be wary of the plant, given that it is often hard to spot and that its poisonous oil, if wiped on camping gear or the fur of a family pet, can be easily transferred to the skin and cause an allergic reaction. About 15 percent of the population is immune, although sensitivity to the plant's poison can change over time and usually increases with multiple exposures.

This year, the entire Northeast had about three extra weeks in early summer when the temperature and moisture levels were ideal for plant development, Prostack said. "We are dramatically ahead of . . . what we would normally see."

Dr. Jack Maypole's right hand fell victim to poison ivy last month. The director of pediatrics at the South End Community Health Center had a rash that lasted two weeks, during which he also dealt with a batch of poison ivy cases among his patients.

"I get it every year; I'm like a culture medium for the stuff," said Maypole, a Newton resident. "It grows in parks, in yards, along streets. It's sort of like trying to avoid air."

Patrick G. Lee can be reached at patrick.lee@globe.com.

WATCH OUT, IT'S EVERYWHERE by Patrick G. Lee

Of all the stories I reported on this summer, this one on poison ivy involved the most collaboration and, I think, represented the best of what teamwork can help produce. The initial idea for the story came from a lot of anecdotal evidence floating around the newsroom -- various editors and reporters remarking that they thought poison ivy was striking back with particular force this season. Then, my editor saw a brief, half-page online blurb about a local little league team that had been affected by poison ivy after the oils got rubbed on a baseball they had used during a practice, and after passing the article off to me, he asked me to investigate whether there was a real trend to report on.

There was, but it took a lot of legwork and good old fashioned gumshoe reporting for me to dig through all the layers. I became an immediate expert on the state of Boston's poison ivy situation, calling up poison ivy "exterminators," experts at the UMass agricultural extension, pharmacists at area drugstores, company executives in the poison ivy ointment industry, hospital emergency rooms and dermatologists. But I never would have constructed as comprehensive a web of knowledge as quickly as I did were it not for the guidance of everyone around me in the newsroom, who gave me sourcing suggestions or put me in touch with their spouses or friends or doctors as possible leads.

The mix of informal and formal sourcing and qualitative and quantitative data that I collected composed an intimidating body of research by the week's end, but weaving it all together and condensing the story down to its essential core was an exciting challenge. In this case, it paid off many times over -- not only because the story got great play in the paper itself, but also because I felt it was one of my stories with the most direct meaning and impact for readers. One of the aims that has driven my work as a health journalist is that of doing readers a public service, and hopefully revealing new things about the world in which they live. Poison ivy, though it may seem like a mundane topic, was one avenue through which I was able to accomplish that aim as a Kaiser intern this past summer.

This article, which originally ran on August 13, 2010, has been reproduced in its entirety on our website with permission from *The Boston Globe*.