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Poison oak's leaf surface can be glossy or dull, sometimes hairy on the lower surface and differing in leaf colors of green, green with red tinges or red to purple in the fall.



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Poison oak is deciduous in winter. It can grow as a dense, woody shrub, 1-6 feet tall, in areas of full sunlight or in shade.

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Poison Oak



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Master Gardener

QUESTION: I've noticed that areas in my yard are being invaded by poison oak. What can I do to control it and avoid the painful rash it can produce?

ANSWER: Pacific poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) and its relative western poison-ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) are both natives to the Pacific Northwest, and members of the sumac family. While western poison-ivy is found in eastern Oregon and Washington, Pacific poison oak can be found in western Oregon and Washington.

Both species grow in a wide range of habitats, from sea level to the 5,000 foot elevations, populating open woodlands, grassy hillsides and coniferous forests – and, as you say, even your own backyard.

Poison oak is identified most readily by its shiny three-leaved leaflets – or as the old adage goes, “Leaves of three, let them be!” These leaves are alternate, 1-4 inch long, smooth, with somewhat lobed edges. They can differ in size and shape, which accounts for their species name having the Latin term *diversilobum*.

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In the spring, poison oak puts out small whitish-green flowers which are followed by whiteish-green, round fruit in late summer. Poison oak reproduces by seed and underground rhizomes.

This plant is deciduous in winter. It can grow as a dense, woody shrub, 1-6 feet tall, in areas of full sunlight or in shade, grow as a climbing vine,



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Poison oak can grow as a climbing vine, wrapping itself up and around trees using aerial roots.

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The primary concern about poison oak, of course, is the allergic reaction it causes in 80% of humans. All members of the sumac family cause allergic contact dermatitis, and all parts of poison oak contain the oily toxin called urushiol, which is present throughout the entire year.

Exposure to urushiol by brushing up against the leaves, stems or roots results in the oil penetrating the skin, which within one to six days will result in skin irritation and itching, followed by water blisters that exude serum.

This oozing serum, by the way, does not contain the allergen and doesn't transmit the rash to other parts of the body or to other individuals. The painful dermatitis rarely lasts more than 10 days. Transmission of the allergen can also occur by touching contaminated clothing, gloves, tools or animals (particularly pets).

Another way to expose yourself to poison oak toxins is to inhale the smoke caused by burning the plant. Inhaling this toxic smoke can cause respiratory tract inflammation, generalized skin dermatitis and, in severe cases, require hospitalization. Therefore, it's best to avoid adding poison oak to burn piles or trying to control it by burning.

To protect yourself when working in areas of poison oak, wear loose-fitting clothing or coveralls, long-sleeved shirts and vinyl gloves to protect the skin from any direct contact with the plant parts. Since the oil can remain viable for long periods of time on clothing, gloves and tools, carefully wash these items with soap and cold water after exposure.

Wash your skin with soap and cold water as soon as possible after exposure, followed up by a mild solvent such as rubbing alcohol. Warm water should be avoided as it enhances the penetration of the oil. Especially make sure to thoroughly wash your

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hands since they are the main path of transmission to other body parts, especially the face.

There is a product called Tecnu, found in most drug stores, that will also remove the poison oak oil from your skin. It can also be used to decontaminate laundry, pets and tools.

So how to manage and control poison oak? There are three methods available: mechanical, biological and chemical.

In areas containing valuable ornamentals, mechanically digging out the roots or hand pulling is one method. It's essential to remove the entire plant, including the roots. This is best done in early spring or late fall when the soil is moist – otherwise, rootstocks can be broken off, resulting in them vigorously re-sprouting.

Dispose of any plant materials by bagging them and taking them to a disposal site.

Poison oak that is climbing trees can be cut at the base as you would English ivy. Mowing is not an effective control.

Sheep or goats will feed on poison oak, but most of us don't have access to a herd of goats.

There are several commonly available herbicides that are effective against

poison oak. Those containing the following active ingredients or mixes and used as a foliar spray can be used for control: glyphosate (Roundup), triclopyr, dicamba and 2,4-D.

Glyphosate is the most effective, depending on proper timing of the application. It's best to apply glyphosate after fruit has formed, but before leaves turn red in the fall, and apply it as a 2% solution in water. Remember Roundup can also kill other nearby plants, so be selective in your spray.

Dicamba, or triclopyr ester mixed with 2,4-D, are most effective when applied when plants are rapidly growing during spring to midsummer. Repeated applications of herbicides over several years are needed for complete control. Whenever using herbicides, remember to always adhere strictly to the product label.

For more thorough discussion of poison oak and its control, go to bit.ly/3YbkvMR.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the Oregon State University Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.