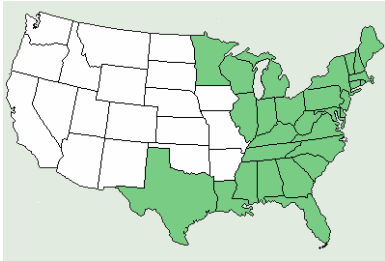




Just the Facts...

Poison Sumac



Poison sumac grows as a shrub or small tree and is found from Maine south to Florida, west to Texas, and north to Minnesota. It thrives in wet soil conditions, and is most commonly encountered in swamps, marshes, and along river or pond shorelines. Plants are poisonous at all times of the year and at all stages of growth. All parts of the plant, except the pollen, contain urushiol, a toxin that causes irritation and blistering of the skin. To cause injury, urushiol must contact the skin, either directly by touching the plant, or indirectly by touching things that have touched the plant such as clothing, tools, animals, or firewood. Although some skin-applied products are marketed that claim to protect against or reduce the severity of dermatitis, the best prevention is to learn to recognize poison sumac and always avoid it.

Range. Poison sumac occurs from Maine south to Florida, west to Texas, and north to Minnesota (shaded states). It is most abundant within the coastal plains and Great Lakes regions.

Q. What does poison sumac look like?

A. Poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix* (L.) Kuntze, also known as

“poison elder”, “poison dogwood”, “swamp sumac”, “poison-wood”, and “poison-tree”, is a woody, perennial plant that grows as a shrub or small tree (average height, 5-6 feet, maximum, 25 feet). The leaves are arranged in groups of 7 to 13 oval leaflets with smooth edges. The leaf stems are always red. The bark is gray and smooth. Small yellow-green flowers develop into grayish white berries, arranged in slender, drooping axillary

(where leaf stems meet the branches) clusters. Plants are reproduced from seeds in the fruit.



Identifying Poison Sumac. Leaves of poison sumac consist of 7 to 13 leaflets arranged in pairs with a single leaflet at the end of the midrib (left). The veins from which the leaflets grow are always red. The leaflets are oval-shaped with smooth edges. Mature plants range in height from 5 to 6 feet, but can grow to 25 feet. Poison sumac shrubs usually have a leaning growth habit (right). Their stems, from ground level to middle height, are the same thickness.



Q. Where am I likely to encounter poison sumac?

A. Poison sumac is found from Maine south to Florida, west to Texas, and north to Minnesota. It is most abundant within the coastal plains and Great Lakes regions, and thrives in wet soil conditions associated with swamps, marshes, and along river or pond shorelines.

Q. How can I tell the harmless types of sumac from poison sumac?

A. Smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*), staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*) and dwarf sumac (*Rhus copallina*) are harmless plants. These species are found in drier, upland habitats, whereas poison sumac prefers wet soils. All three harmless species have red fruits that together form a distinctive terminal seed head. Smooth and staghorn sumacs have more than 13 leaflets, and the leaflet edges are serrated.



Friend or Foe? Poison sumac can be distinguished from harmless smooth, staghorn, or dwarf sumac by the shape or location of blooms, fruit, and leaves. Smooth and staghorn sumac have slender, lance-shaped leaflets with serrated edges (bottom, left). Harmless sumacs have red fruits that form a distinctive terminal seed head (top, left). Poison and dwarf sumac leaflets are oval-shaped with smooth edges (bottom, right). Poison sumac has yellowish-green flowers arranged in clusters on small branches (top, right), that mature into grayish white berries (bottom, center).

Q. Why is it important not to come in contact with poison sumac?

A. All parts of poison sumac plants, except the pollen, contain a toxic, oily substance, called urushiol (pronounced "you-ROO-shee-ol"). It is present in the plant throughout the year. Urushiol causes irritation and blistering of the skin. To cause dermatitis, the oil must contact the skin, either directly by touching the plant, or indirectly by touching things that have touched the plant such as gloves or other clothing, tools, animals, water, or firewood. The dermatitis is apparently an anaphylactic reaction; that is, it occurs only after sensitization by previous

exposure. Individual sensitivity can vary from extreme susceptibility to near immunity. Dermatitis usually appears within 12 to 24 hours, but may appear in as little to 3 or 4 hours or be delayed for several days.

Q. What can I do if I suspect that my skin or clothes have been exposed to urushiol?

A. After contact with urushiol, it usually takes a little while for it to penetrate the skin. Washing thoroughly within 5-10 minutes after contact can significantly reduce likelihood/severity of dermatitis. Wash the exposed skin with soap and cold water, followed with rubbing alcohol or a solution of water and alcohol in equal proportions to dissolve the unabsorbed urushiol. Rinse thoroughly, since this solution only flushes away the poison, and does not inactivate it. Urushiol can remain active on contaminated clothing, bedding, tools, and other surfaces for years. Ordinary hot temperature laundering will usually get rid of urushiol on fabrics. Thoroughly rinse with water any contaminated tools or equipment.



Contact Dermatitis. Symptoms such as skin itchiness, swelling, inflammation, and the formation of blisters usually appear within 12 to 24 hours after contact with the sap of poison sumac.

Q. How can I protect myself against the dermatitis caused by poison sumac?

A. The best prevention is recognition of poison sumac plants and appropriate avoidance. Barrier creams containing 5% bentoquatam, are the only FDA-approved, skin-applied products that have been proven to protect against or reduce the severity of the rash caused by poison sumac, when applied at least 15 minutes prior to exposure.

Q. What are some of the common myths associated with poison sumac?

FICTION		FACT
You can become immune to the effects of poison sumac by eating the leaves.	→	Immunity not conferred by eating any plant part; ingestion can cause serious gastric disturbance.
The rash from poison sumac is contagious; breaking the blisters will spread the rash.	→	Blisters contain only body fluids; they cannot spread the rash on the skin or to other people.
You can develop a rash from poison sumac simply by being near the plants.	→	Rash results only if urushiol touches skin; airborne contact possible if burning/mowing plants.
It is safe to handle dead plants or dormant plants during the wintertime.	→	Plants are poisonous year-round; urushiol stays active on surfaces and in dead plants for 2 years.
If you don't develop a rash after touching poison sumac once, then you must be immune.	→	First exposure seldom produces rash; sensitivity can change with age and repeated exposure.

Q. How can I eliminate poison sumac from my property?

A. The presence of poison sumac should not be tolerated around child day care facilities or schools, and can be a significant nuisance when present in the landscaping outside dwellings and workplaces. Consult with Preventive Medicine Activity personnel at your supporting clinic to identify suspect plants found around a building. Seek the assistance of the Installation Pest Control Office before applying herbicides for poison sumac control.

Nonchemical Approaches. Young shoots can be repeatedly mowed/cut until the energy stored in the roots is exhausted and the plants die. Roots can be dug up and pulled out of the soil. All the roots must be removed to achieve eradication. Dispose of plant parts where they cannot contaminate people or animals. Never try to destroy poison sumac with fire. When a poison sumac plant is burned, urushiol goes into the air on the dust and soot in smoke, and this can result in an allergic reaction in the eyes and respiratory tract or on the skin.

Chemical Approaches. Herbicide products that contain the active ingredient glyphosate or triclopyr are two of the most effective tools for poison sumac elimination around a property. Sprays must contact the leaves to be effective. However, care must be exercised when using these herbicides, since most shrubs, broadleaf ground covers, or herbaceous garden plants which are contacted by the sprays will be killed. Herbicides may not provide 100% control from a single application, and repeat applications to treat regrowth may be necessary.

References:

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