

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Eastern Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*)

Poison Ivy is perhaps one of the most common native woody vines occurring in all states east of the Rockies. It is in the *Anacardiaceae* (Sumac) family. This family includes the Mango, Pistachio, and the Cashew. It was formerly called *Rhus radicans*.

Poison Ivy is extremely variable in form, occurring as a ground cover along roadsides, an erect shrub (especially in sandy coastal areas), or a vine on trees. The alternate leaves have rather long stalks and are palmately compound (the leaflets radiate outward from a center point, like the fingers on your hand). The end leaflet is longer stalked than the side pair. The three leaflets are about 2" to 4" in length. The old vine stems are covered with fibrous roots that look hairy and you may see these stems without any leaves present. In spring to mid summer, the off-white with a yellowish to greenish tinge flowers appear in loose clusters from the leaf axils. The flowers have five petals and are about 1/8" diameter.



In the photo at the upper right, you can see the reddish emerging leaves along with some fruit just forming. The round, off-white fruits also have a yellowish or greenish tinge, are about 1/4 inch in diameter, and ripen in late summer through late fall—about the same time the leaves turn bright red, providing a cue to the many birds that feed on the fruits. Look for these bright red leaves as you walk in the Preserve. The red leaves are even more evident since the cold weather. The leaves fall off the plant if temperatures drop below freezing, so you may see a few single, dangling leaves, instead of three. However, the fruits remain on the plants through the winter.



Remember the old adage: "Leaves of three let them be." This is a plant that causes many people to have allergies when coming into contact. It isn't just the leaves—all parts of the plant may cause severe skin irritation in people

that are sensitive. Those with severe allergies may only have to be in the general area to be affected. Although humans have a problem with it, the plant serves as a food source for much wildlife. Fruits are eaten by many birds and gopher tortoises enjoy the leaves. New shoots sprout from existing roots, from rhizomes (underground stems that help stabilize the soil), from climbing vines, and of course, from seed. They take advantage of plants around them to climb, using wild coffee, green brier, palms, or other plants. Look closely as you walk through the Preserve to find these cunning plants that hide among others.



Where there are forest fires, Poison Ivy may be top-killed during a fire. The fruits also may be killed along with aerial stems; however surviving rhizomes and root crowns will sprout to establish new stands. Ask a fire-fighter about fuel ladders. Climbing vines such as Poison Ivy form fuel ladders and may cause flare-ups in a forest fire. The compound that causes allergic reactions is *urushiol*, which can be carried by particles of soot when the plant is burned. Inhaling smoke filled with these particles may cause severe respiratory problems.