

Rhus radicans

[Synonyms : *Ampelopsis hoggii*, *Rhus rydbergii*, *Rhus toxicodendron*, *Toxicodendron radicans*, *Toxicodendron vulgare*]

POISON IVY is a deciduous shrub or vine. Native to North America it has small green-streaked, yellowish-white flowers and leaves that turn brilliant orange and scarlet in Autumn.

It is also known as American poison ivy, Black mercury, Bushy vine, Climbing sumac, Cow-itch, Eastern poison ivy, Hiedra, Markry, Markweed, Mercury, Pickry, Poison creeper, Poison mercury, Poison oak, Poison vine, *Škumpa jedovatá* (Czech), *Škumpa kořenující* (Czech), *Sumach koreňujúci* (Slovak), *Sumako venena* (Esperanto), Three-leaved ivy, Trailing sumac, and Western poison ivy.

Warning – the sap in all parts of the plant is poisonous. Handling or close proximity to the plant (and even the touch of the smoke from the burning wood, or an animal that has brushed against it) can cause an allergic reaction that varies in intensity with the individual – and can be recurrent. It must not be taken internally unless under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. Externally it can cause itching, inflammation, blistering, swelling, ulceration and intolerable pain. (This can sometimes be relieved or even prevented if immediately upon exposure the skin is washed with soap thoroughly or swabbed with alcohol as this can remove the irritant oil.) Internally it can cause severe irritation of the digestive system and death. (Having said this however there are some people who seem to have a built-in immunity.)

The leaves of poison ivy have been confused with those of wild sarsaparilla (*Aralia nudicaulis*) but unlike those of the latter they are irregularly and sparsely toothed, as well as of virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*). Poison ivy is also similar to poison oak (*Rhus toxicodendron*) but unlike the latter its leaves are less rounded and the fruit are waxy.

Radicans is derived from Latin *radicis* (root) meaning ‘with rooting stems’.

In North America (although many Indian tribes including the Thompson Indians considered the plant to be too poisonous) the Forest Potawatomi used a poultice of powdered root to open swellings, and the Kiowa sometimes used the sap to treat running sores. Houma Indians took a leaf decoction as a tonic, and Cherokee Indians used it to cause vomiting. Some of the Algonkin rubbed the leaves on areas of skin affected by poison ivy symptoms.

Some of the Navajo tribe used the shrub as an ingredient in their arrow poison. They also had what would seem to be a risky tradition or superstition in view of their knowledge of the plant’s poisonous nature. In order to ensure good luck in gambling they chewed a leaf and gave it to their opponent.

Poison ivy was introduced to England in 1640.

The juice used to be an ingredient in shoe creams, and was also used as an indelible ink for marking linen.

Both game and song birds are unaffected by the plant’s poisons, feed on the berries that sometimes persist through Winter, and help to play their part in the distribution of the undigested seeds.

Its use medicinally in Europe only began in 1798 after a French physician learnt that a young man who had been suffering from herpes (on his wrist) for six years had been cured after accidental poisoning by the plant. From this beginning physicians and herbalists recommended use of the plant for a variety of disorders ranging from skin eruptions to paralysis and acute rheumatism. Today its only medicinal use is in homoeopathic remedies.