

Poison oak leaves an oily residue on the body which may cause a painful and itchy reaction in the vast majority of people. It is therefore important to identify and to avoid poison oak when possible. In case contact is made please read on to assess ways to prevent an allergic reaction or to treat one that is ongoing. This brief pamphlet will provide basic skills and pertinent facts about the plant.

Poison oak is predominantly on the West Coast in the USA. It is an interesting plant in that it can appear visually in many different manners; poison oak is a chameleon of a plant, and I often find people are surprised to learn the plant they are sitting on is poison oak because it didn't look how they thought it did. Therefore it is critically important to know the variety of ways poison oak can look.

It is important to note that the branches themselves carry the oil that causes allergic reactions, so it is important to be able to identify poison oak even without leaves on it, as you will often find it through the winter.

How To Identify Poison Oak

To begin, let's go over how to and how not to identify poison oak:

1. Know that it can appear in many different forms, from shrubs to vines to even small trees.
2. Look for smooth gray bark with occasional knobs
3. Look for the branches pointing upwards at around 60 degrees
4. Look for leaves that are purple to green in spring, green to red in Summer, and red to brown in Fall and Winter, and no leaves from mid to late winter into early spring.
5. Look for groups of three leaves with the distinctive oak leaf shape if it isn't winter



Above: this is what an oak leaf looks like.



Above: you can see the significant similarity that gives this plant its name. Poison oak leaves start out very small in spring, and although they can sometimes be very large, they are generally roughly an inch to two inches long.

Poison oak prefers partial shade. You will therefore rarely see it in places where it will receive all day sun such as an open meadow. Rather, you will usually see it in tree cover or behind objects such as other plants and rocks that shade it for part of the day. Also, it only grows from sea level up to about 5,000', so it is a non-factor at higher elevations.



Above: Many would struggle to identify the above plant as poison oak, but it is of significant importance that you can. This photo was taken in early spring, but poison oak usually looks like this dormant stage all winter. It is important to note that even the bark carries the oil that causes allergic reactions, so even dormant plants like this are a threat! So how can one identify the above plant as poison oak?



Well, for one thing notice that the stems are a gray color and that they are mostly smooth, often with occasional knobs on them. Frequently the main stem of the plant is smoother with the branches that stick out being knobbier. Also notice how the branches tend to point upwards at about 60 degrees relative to the main stem of the plant. They usually form sharp angles, although curved branches are not uncommon.

Fortunately, most of the year poison oak does have its extremely characteristic leaves to guide us in identifying it.



Above: The poison oak plant has a characteristic oak leaf shape with rounded edges. Note how different it looks to the somewhat similar but harmless plant on the bottom right with the sharp edges. Also notice that the poison oak has a glossy sheen from its problem causing oil.

Note that the leaves on the poison oak plant are grouped into threes, all meeting at a common origin. This leads to the popular phrase “leaves of three, leave it be.” Considering that poison oak usually has leaves on it for three out of four seasons a year, it’s pretty good guidance.

The Many Colors of Poison Oak

Many expect poison oak to be green and end up in contact with it because it being a different color they didn't identify it as poison oak. In reality often poison oak is green for only part of the year. Poison Oak usually starts as a purple color in the late winter to early Spring, then to green some time around spring or summer, to red by summer or fall, and if it gets much sun it will usually be brown by late fall or early winter.

Let us review the colors one can see in poison oak.



Above: a vibrant purple with a glossy sheen means it's extra oily. Poison Oak will often look like this in late winter and early spring.



This poison oak is turning from purple to green, and has lost much of its glossy sheen.



Above: by late spring into summer poison oak will often appear vibrantly green, although you may find some patches of bright green poison oak in early spring as well.



The vibrant red stage is usually seen in late summer and into fall.

Sometimes the poison oak will turn brown late in the year, often with remnants of green or red. I do not currently have any photos of this, but I will upload them when I obtain them.

The Many Forms of Poison Oak



People generally expect poison oak to appear in small, separate bunches. The above photo is what people seem to expect to see.



A thicker density is still easily identifiable. But poison oak is capable of so much more.



Above: they appear as vines growing on the ground.



Above: they appear as vines growing upwards.



Above: although hard to see, the above vines are over six feet tall!



Above: Here the plant presents itself as a giant shrub, again reaching to over six feet tall.



Above: although I lost my photos from before we trimmed it, this particular bush was standing over 8' tall and looked like a small tree. Here it stands about three feet tall and about two inches around. I've only seen this the once, but just know that poison oak can keep you on your toes!



Above: the poison oak plant late in winter and early in spring often has tiny leaves that don't share their characteristic shape.

Lastly, later in the year poison oak will actually flower and have berries. Many people don't know that the plant does either, and end up coming into contact with it for this reason.



Here we see the berries starting to grow in mid to late Spring.



Above we can see the flowers blooming and the berries turning yellow.



Above: late in the year the berries will turn tan.

What I would like the reader to take away is that identifying poison oak simply by expecting it to present itself a certain way is a common mistake. Poison oak is rather unique in its ability to look extremely different in one location to another. Rather, one should learn to identify it without leaves, and for most of the year when it does have leaves to expect a wide range of possible colors.

Poison oak prevention and treatment

Note that it takes time for poison oak's oil (Urushiol) to soak into the skin and cause a reaction. This means that if you make contact with poison oak that you have a brief period of some hours to remove it before you get a serious allergic reaction. Use a good soap and cold water so as to not open up the pores in your skin. If you frequent areas with poison oak you may want to invest in some [Tecnu wipes](#) which are designed to remove the urushiol oil. A good dish soap like Dawn also works great.

Note that it is common for people to touch poison oak with their hands and then only partially wash their hands with sufficient thoroughness, thus leading to reactions in between the fingers. If you make contact with poison oak make sure to wash everywhere it might have made contact.

If you do get an allergic reaction you can expect it to be several weeks of suffering, but you can help the rash heal more quickly and alleviate the symptoms to some degree. Colloidal oatmeal (literally just ground oatmeal, buy at a pharmacy or put some oatmeal in a blender) baths help symptoms a lot. A steroid cream such as 1% hydrocortisone can offer relief, but it may not prove strong enough in which case a prescription would be required.

Make sure not to use the following creams: antihistamine creams, anesthetic creams with benzocaine, and antibiotic creams with neomycin or bacitracin. Calamine lotion is a good choice.

If you get severe poison oak blisters try using a drying agent such as aluminum hydroxide gel, zinc acetate, or zinc oxide.

Also note that you can obtain a poison oak reaction without direct contact with the plant. Getting it on your clothes or your pet may be sufficient. Therefore if your pant legs brush up against the plant, for example, exert great caution in what those pants touch before they make it into the laundry.

Avoiding poison oak is a skill that can be developed very quickly, and hopefully this guide has provided sufficient knowledge for the reader to avoid urushiol allergic reactions while enjoying the outdoors.

Good luck out there!