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Poisonous Plants

Autumn is the time for enjoying Wakulla County's great outdoors. There is boating, cycling, hiking, hunting and numerous other leisure time ways to relish the pleasant benefits of nature.

It is easy to forget that not all nature has to offer is an enjoyable experience. One consideration before tromping off into unfamiliar woods and other wild terrain is to get familiar with some of the more common poisonous plants.

A little knowledge can save hours or days of the uncomfortable after-effects of coming in contact with poisonous plants. Avoiding this unpleasant experience will save money, too. Topical treatments and, in extreme cases, doctor's visits will dent the household budget.

Poisonous plants can be divided into two groups those which cause skin irritation, and those which cause internal distress, and in rare cases, even death. These plants are found not only in natural settings, they occur almost everywhere soil is exposed to the sun in Wakulla County.

Many factors influence the toxic nature of a particular plant. The problem substance can be dispersed throughout the plant, or localized in a particular plant part, such as in roots, berries, or seeds. The amount of poison in a plant may vary, even among plants of the same species depending on the time of year, the weather conditions, and the soil.

Reactions vary among people coming in contact with a harmful plant. The health and age of the person, and the quantity of the substance contacted will influence the symptoms.

Poison ivy is a commonly encountered vine which causes an itchy rash. It is often intermingled with Virginia Creeper, a vine with many look-alike features, but no negative side effects.



The one constant identifying feature of poison ivy is the leaves always come in threes, with two of them directly opposite each other. Creeper has a cluster five leaves. Neither vine has thorns unlike blackberries or dewberries which have a three leaf cluster on their canes.

Poison ivy will grow in full shade climbing into trees, over fences, and up the side of walls. In the full sun of open fields it appears as a shrub.

Like creeper, poison ivy has a variety of leaf shapes. Sometime creeper will have a cluster of three leaves on a vine, but five-leaf clusters will be on the same vine.

In autumn both creeper and poison ivy turn cherry red, but there is a slight tint difference between the two. A trained eye can make the distinction between the two shades of color.

Poison oak usually appears as a low growing shrub. The slender, upright branches bear leaflet which resemble oak leaves. They also grow in threes, just like poison ivy. The undersides of the leaves commonly are lighter in color because they're covered with fine hair-like structures.



Poison sumac is a coarse woody shrub or small tree. It never grows in the vine-like fashion of poison ivy. It frequently grows near swamps and wetlands, and ranges in height from five or six feet to twenty-five feet.



Its leaves are divided into seven to thirteen leaflets which grow in pairs. At the end of each stem is a single leaflet. In the spring, leaves are bright orange and velvety in texture. In the summer they become dark green and glossy, with lower leaves a pale green in color. In autumn the leaves take on a russet brown color.

To learn more about local poisonous plants, contact the UF/IFAS Wakulla Extension Office at 850-926-3931 or visit <http://wakulla.ifas.ufl.edu/> and leave your comments and questions about the article.