



# YCPARMIA

# Poison Oak

June 2005

## The Problem

Poison oak, like poison ivy, is a member of the cashew family of plants. It produces a nonvolatile phenolic substance called urushiol. Urushiol causes skin irritation which can lead to an allergic contact dermatitis. No one is born sensitive to poison oak. Sensitivity is acquired by repeated contacts with the plant. Although the results of early exposures will often be mild, each exposure tends to increase a person's sensitivity to the urushiol oil. Over time this can result in a serious allergic response to any exposure. Development of the contact dermatitis is a function of a person's sensitivity to the urushiol, and can be caused by:

- ❖ Bodily contact with any part of the plant,
- ❖ Exposure to smoke from the burning plant, or
- ❖ Contact with urushiol contaminated objects.

During recent weeks, several of our members have reported injuries to employees from contact with poison oak. It is important to prevent exposure, and to properly treat any accidental exposure, to avoid sensitization.



## Prevention

It is important to be able to recognize poison oak so that it can be avoided. It is usually found as an erect shrub which can be as much as 6 feet tall. The leaves appear in groups of 3 oval or roundish leaflets with lobes. In forests, poison oak may be a vine up to 30 feet tall. If possible, avoid all contact with the plant. In areas where poison oak interferes with normal work requirements, it should be removed. Herbicides are the safest method of control, as they require little exposure to the plant. If this is not feasible, the poison oak should be removed by digging it out. Burial of the plants is the proper means of disposal.

When it is necessary to work in poison oak, the worker must be protected by appropriate clothing and barrier creams. (Highly sensitized workers should have no contact with poison oak.) Disposable coveralls, boot covers, and heavy gloves are the best choice. Garments must be taken off carefully and disposed of in plastic bags to avoid contact with the exterior of the garments. The urushiol oils have been known to remain on clothing for as long as one year. Soap and water washing of garments is not always effective.

## First Aid Treatment

If an employee accidentally contacts poison oak, the affected area should be washed as soon as possible with soap and room temperature water, and rinsed. (Urushiol enters the skin rapidly; waiting 10 minutes after exposure may be too long.) Washing should be repeated 5-6 times. After washing, it helps to apply rubbing alcohol and then rinse with water. To control itching, calamine lotion can be patted on and allowed to dry. Do not rub, scratch, or brush the skin. Any injury can increase the risk of dermatitis.