

The Poison Ivy Slayer's Handbook

by Bland Pseudonym

Second Edition

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Dedicated to my father. If you keep reading, you'll find out why.

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

I should start by admitting something you've probably already figured out: Bland Pseudonym is not my actual legal name. Really. Not that I've anything against my name, but when dealing with a topic as dangerous as poison ivy I would prefer to maintain a low profile. If you are wondering why, I invite you to reflect for a moment on the fact that my parents did not name me "Sue Me". I never once considered having the words "Sue Me" tattooed on my forehead. Poison ivy slaying involves risks; I willingly accept the risks associated with my activities, but those risks pale in comparison to the risks of lawsuits. Funny thing about lawsuits and nuclear war: even if you win, you lose. No thank you. I'd rather remain anonymous.

There's always a danger when writing about doing something dangerous: not everyone is a critical thinker while they're reading. Consider a hypothetical example: suppose you stumbled upon a document titled *How to Jump out of an Airplane Without a Parachute and Survive*. The author then tells stories about how he has jumped out of a variety of different airplanes repeatedly and never once had to use a parachute. He tells the stories in enough detail that you are convinced he is speaking from personal experience. He then goes on to teach you standard paratrooper training points about how to perform a "Parachute Landing Fall". When properly done, this 5 point technique will dissipate the impact of the fall and allow you to survive a major fall uninjured. Suppose you then search Google and get verification that this is a legitimate technique. So you're convinced. Suppose you decide this is something worth trying. Which is a real shame, because there's something that the author failed to mention: All those times he jumped out of an airplane without a parachute, the plane was on the ground and stationary. The author didn't include that detail because he considered it so blindingly obvious that he wouldn't have to. But suppose for you, he did have to. And so suppose splat. Okay, you can stop supposing now.

All of which is to say that I urge you to think critically about what you are reading. Don't just do something as risky as poison ivy slaying just because you read one document. Consult other sources, get the best advice you can, and proceed cautiously. I'm giving you honest information from personal experience here, and I'm doing my best to not leave anything out; still, I'm only human and I don't know what my blind spots are. I've got a family to feed, and I'd prefer not to paint a target on my back. (Some people reading this may know who I am, but please don't spread it around. I don't need that kind of fame.)

Despite my desire for anonymity, a bit of personal background is in order here: Assisting with poison ivy eradication was my first job; I started when I was three year's old. My parents wanted to move to a town that had a better school district than the one they were living in, but they were not finding anything they could afford. Eventually, though, they found a rental property that was just about perfect for them. It had one major problem: it was covered in poison ivy. As Dad described it, "If it was green, it was poison ivy." And so he started working at removing it. He had me accompany him and he gave me a responsibility: I was his poison ivy spotter. He taught me to recognize poison ivy (a good idea for any kid, but especially one living where we did). He then asked me to point out any poison ivy he missed. I'm sure he just wanted to spend time with me and to give Mom a break, but (according to him later) I started getting good at it. I was genuinely spotting some very small and hard to spot seedlings. For my part, I considered it a fun game. My dad's encouragement and gratitude was a big help too. Mainly, though, I had a sense that I was accomplishing something worthwhile. I was hooked.

My dad succeeded in keeping poison ivy under control at our house for decades. The first few years were hard and time consuming. Soon, though, it became a minor chore. He eventually helped out taming poison ivy in the surrounding area as well. I knew firsthand that what he was doing was actually effective.

Years later, after I had a family of my own, I moved to a house at an ideal location with a big poison ivy problem; now it's my turn. My dad reviewed the process with me, and I got to work. After the first year, I had made visible progress but I still had big problem. After the second year it was obvious I had it on the run. A few years later, and I was able to consider it under control. Decades later, I find that I can just go over the property about once a year and get rid of any fresh seedling. It's not extinct, but it's not a problem.

Like my dad, I found opportunities to help others by assisting them in taming their own poison ivy problems. There are a couple of Christian camps locally that I have also been able to help out. I don't do it for profit, but I am pleased to be able to accomplish something worthwhile. I'm still hooked.

At some point it occurred to me that it might be nice to set down on paper (or on .pdf) my instructions and advice on the subject of poison ivy eradication. I'm not an obvious person to do so; I'm neither a botanist nor an environmentalist. Neither was my Dad. I've had no formal training on the subject, and I've never really done any serious academic research on it. I've never made any money off poison ivy removal. My sole credential as a poison ivy slayer is experience. I've gotten some impressive results (if I do say so myself), just like my father before me. If I can pass on some experience that might help others get similarly impressive results, wonderful.

This is intended to be a personal reflection. As you may have noticed, this document is sort of turning into my memoir. I get too few opportunities to ramble, so I'm taking advantage of this one. You can listen in or tune me out, your choice.

THE BASICS

Poison ivy is a plant found throughout the eastern United States and Canada. It is (I'm told) found elsewhere as well, but I don't go there so that's your problem not mine. This plant produces an oily set of compounds known collectively as urushiol. The sap of this plant is loaded with the stuff. If you touch the leaves of this plant and get this oily compound on your skin, it is quickly absorbed and produces a painful itchy rash that lasts many days. You can also get this compound on you if you break or cut the stem (technically the aerial root). It's even worse if you ingest it or inhale the smoke from burning it.

Not everyone reacts to poison ivy. Some people will not react at all when exposed to poison ivy. Most people do, and some react very badly. If you are one of the lucky few who don't, it is best still to minimize your exposure. Poison ivy is a sensitizer, so you might develop a reaction over time and over repeated exposures. I never got it until I was in my late twenties, then I did. Nothing ever happens until it happens for the first time. Be warned.

Don't overreact to the first word in the name of this plant: poison ivy is not in the same category as anthrax or botulism. Urushiol won't kill you; it will just suck all the joy out of your life for a few days. (I am told there are very rare fatalities; please consult internet rumors and the legal department for more details.)

Then again, don't underestimate the negative effects of poison ivy. Having a painful

rash affects your behavior and your attitude. You find poison ivy outside in the wild; there's a big wide wonderful world outside that is just waiting to be enjoyed, and anything that interferes with that enjoyment is a serious problem. You go out hiking (or even just playing in the backyard), you run into poison ivy and get a rash, you decide it wasn't that much fun after all, and you decide instead to go inside and play video games. Pretty soon everyone is inside playing videogames, and what kind of a world would you get? Oh yeah, the world we have right now. Now I enjoy a good video game every so often, but I know from personal experience that getting out in nature regularly is good for my own mental health. So poison ivy acts as a nudge in the wrong direction; consider what would happen if that direction was reversed. I mean, just imagine what would happen if videogame controllers were altered to be able to give you a skin rash that sucked all the joy out of life for a few days.

Okay, I just imagined it. Oh man. If I were a mad scientist I would totally invent that and make it clear to everyone that I had it and was prepared to use it. Talk about power. The nations of the world would tremble at the very thought of the horrors I could unleash upon humanity. They would fall all over themselves in a mad rush to obey my merest whim, lest I carry through with my implied threat. And if I did have to drop the bomb, what then? People would decide that first person shooter games were really not worth it, so instead they would find a creek somewhere and catch salamanders and crawdads, and the world would be a better place as a result. So: global domination, with a side of altruism; what's not to love?

... Okay, deep breath. I'm back. Don't mind me; I just get that way sometimes. It's a good thing I'm not a mad scientist. Yet.

For the record: I don't hate poison ivy. The poison ivy plant is a native species in this area, so it has every right to be a part of this environment (unlike some other ivy plants I could name, and yes, I'm looking at you kudzu.) When I go to a national park, I will sometimes spot poison ivy vines that I'm pretty sure are older than I am; but since it is not bothering anyone there, I smile and walk on. I also smile when I see poison ivy grow where nothing else would be able to (on sand dunes at a beach, for example.) The biosphere would be a poorer place indeed if this plant went extinct.

Even urushiol has an upside. I am told that the Japanese use the urushiol from a related plant to produce a particularly strong and beautiful lacquer. (So wait a minute. Somebody talks the toxin from poison ivy, coats it on pots etc. and puts it in people's houses, and persuade everyone that this is a good thing? Wow, I thought I was a mad scientist wannabe, but even I never dreamed up a scheme like that. Bravo.)

Therefore, my goal is to keep the poison ivy plant under control and away from where people are likely to encounter it. I also want to be able to provide others with what they need to help with this effort. This document is written to that end.

RECOGNISING POISON IVY

For starters, consider the old saying "Leaves of three, let it be." That's a good place to start. Just take a look at this picture:



Note the three leaflets. Note the "T" shaped connection between them; it is short at the top but long extending to the middle leaflet. Note also that the leaflets are all pointed at the end.

Beyond that, the appearance of a poison ivy leaf can vary considerably. Its edges may be jagged or smooth. It may or may not have a shiny appearance. Its color and size may vary considerably. There might be regional differences, but what I've noticed is that there can be different appearances within the same region. So to find out the possible appearances in your area, go out, find some poison ivy plants, and study their appearances.

So, okay, how do you spot a poison ivy plant if you can't rely on the appearance of the leaves? It is actually easier to spot a mature poison ivy plant by looking at its stem (or, to be technical, aerial roots). Look for a root growing on the side of a tree. It won't be wound around the tree; it will grow more or less straight up. Note that the root will have a hairy appearance. Here's a good example:



Again, the appearance can vary, but the appearance of the root is more constant than the appearance of the leaves. Note that there are some other types of vines that also have similar aerial roots. The Virginia creeper, for example, has hairy aerial roots (although the "hairs" are generally thicker and longer). So look for the combination of leaves of three coming off a hairy aerial root. That combination pretty much guarantees that it is poison ivy. If you want further confirmation, look for round white or green berries at the end of the branches:



Depending on the season or the age of the plant, you might not see them; if you do, though, then it is confirmed to be definitely poison ivy. Once you spot one, look around you; you will probably spot very similar ones in the surrounding area with very similar leaves. No coincidence, that; those are its progeny. Keep track of their appearance; you will be seeing more of them all over the place in your region.

By the way, I have my own version of that old saying: "Leaves of three, let them be. Unless you're me, if so - yippee!".

Once you get used to spotting actual poison ivy in your area, it is a good idea to start familiarizing yourself with the local poison ivy mimics. Not everything with leaves of three is toxic. The obvious example: "Leaves of three, straw-bear-ree". (Not a common saying, but perhaps it should be.) The strawberry plant has leaves with three leaflets on them, although the leaflets are not pointed. There are varieties of other plants in my area that have leaves of three; most are either herbaceous or otherwise identifiable as not poison ivy. I've found it useful to identify common mimics at a glance; it helps cut down on the plant equivalent of a wild goose chase.

Here's a quick example of a mimic:



I did a Google search on this picture, and Google said it was likely poison ivy. Shortly after I took this picture, I picked these leaves and rubbed them vigorously on my upper arm. I never got any rash, so I can be confident a week later that it was not poison ivy. (I point and laugh at Google here.) I also noted that the leaf arrangement was opposite, not alternate (like poison ivy). The plant was also shrubby, not viney. I was quite certain it was not poison ivy before I tested it on myself. I would not recommend self-testing; still, it is a great way of convincing others that you are confident you know what you're doing. Be warned: mistakes of this nature can be rather embarrassing (and worse!).

I try to avoid killing mimics. Sometimes I do anyway when I'm not absolutely sure it's a mimic. Sometimes I do when I'm trying to impress the people I'm doing it for and I don't want them to think I missed one. And sometimes I do when I'm just in a bad mood. There's a cautionary tale there somewhere. Don't pretend to be something that people want to kill, because sometimes people are in a bad mood.

Just to give you practice at spotting poison ivy, here are a few pictures that have poison ivy plants in them. How long does it take to spot them? (Answer key at the back of this document):



HOW POISON IVY SPREADS AND TAKES OVER

Once you've learned to spot poison ivy, you need to learn to think like a poison ivy plant. Consider how it goes about its plan for world conquest.



Here's where it all begins: the seedling. It can show up anywhere, but seems to grow best around the edge of a forest in a spot with plenty of sunshine near trees that are waiting to be taken advantage of. It will grow throughout the summer, lose its leaves in the fall, and then go dormant in the winter. It will be ready to return in the spring.



Early in the spring, you will notice some shoots that start to develop the familiar leaves of three pattern. It is in a good position to catch the sunlight and shade the surrounding plants. As it grows, it either will develop into a small shrub (particularly if it had good sunlight) or will just form a patch of little stems. I've seen both. It's growing, but the most important growth is happening underground. It's sending out runners; the root will grow out until it sends out some new shoots about 1-2 feet away.

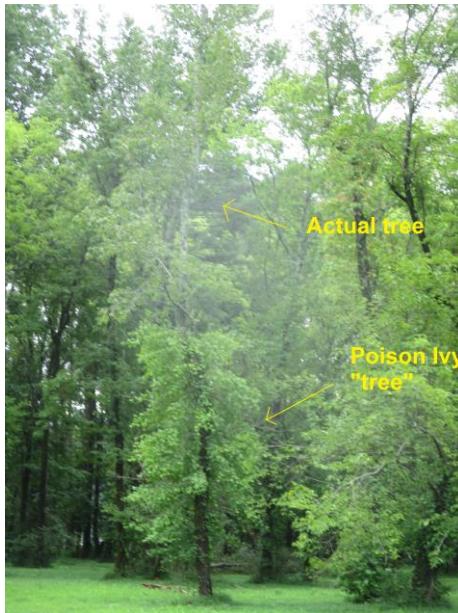


At first glance, this might appear to be a picture of isolated seedlings. Note, though, the even spacing between the plants. If you were to pull up one of the, you would find that they are all connected. These runners will keep spreading until you get a thick patch of poison ivy. Given time, it will eventually shade out the other plants in the area and become the dominant life form. Nasty, but that's not its real goal.



Aha, jackpot! The root has eventually found what it is really looking for - a tree to grow up on. Note that it isn't really hurting the tree (uncharacteristically benevolent for such a nasty plant); it is just using the tree trunk as a support in its effort to overshade and conquer the world. Seizing the high ground is a strategy as old as war itself. The vine will grow up quite high in the tree. Over time, the aerial root will grow quite thick and the branches extending out from it

will grow quite large. It will resemble a tree on a tree.



Eventually, you will start getting berries. The poison ivy plant is now a reproducing vine. When those green berries turn white, they are ripe. Many will just drop off, scattering seeds in the surrounding area to further saturate it with new plants to eliminate the competition. Some of the berries are eaten by birds; the seed passes through the bird's digestive tract and then is planted splat along with fertilizer at a place quite far from the original plant. New worlds, just waiting to be conquered. And so the pattern begins again. And again and again.

Just when all hope seems lost and the world looks doomed, a hero shows up. You. Cure the theme music. It's time to get to work.

WHAT A WELL-DRESSED HERO WEARS

Obviously, you won't be dressed just like someone else going out in the woods. You're dressed to kill. Literally, in this case. You are going to be depending on your clothing as the last line of defense against urushiol. How you dress is up to you; you want to be comfortable with your choice, though. I have nothing against the disposable Tyvek chemical workers garments per se; I just consider them hot and impractical. Then again, dressing up in one of those is a great way of being inconspicuous and blending in.

Me? I generally wear good denim pants with reasonably thick socks. I used to wear old sneakers that I set aside specifically for poison ivy; recently, though, I've been forgetting to switch from my ordinary sneakers and so far, they haven't contaminated me. I wear a long-sleeved baseball shirt with a flannel overshirt if the weather is at all cold. I wear leather work gloves when I need to, but generally keep them in my back pocket. Most of the time when I've gotten a poison ivy rash it has been on my wrists, so I've taken to cutting the end off an old sock and wearing the sock over my wrists.

A word about clothing: if you are going to do your job effectively, you will eventually need to walk through a patch of poison ivy plants. Try to avoid contact, but don't obsess; you eventually need to decide to just plow through it. As far as I can tell, I've never gotten poison

ivy through blue jeans.

Don't forget to accessorize. I wear a washable hat to protect from sunlight, rain, and ticks. Sunscreen and bug spray are both in order. I generally wear a lightweight backpack with a pocket to keep a disposable water bottle in. (As you will recall, you will be wearing long-sleeves and long pants today; you will get hot, so remember to stay hydrated.) The backpack is also a good place to keep an umbrella (to ensure that it won't rain), a camera (we'll talk about that one later), and possibly lunch (yum). The straps of the backpack are also a convenient place to hold your lopping shears as long as you can manage not to stab yourself in the armpit with it.

One last thing and this is important: put an unsharpened pencil in your back pocket, eraser side down. Murphy's Law says that right when you are in the middle of a major operation, your forehead will itch furiously. You will be tempted unthinkingly to scratch your forehead with your gloves. That's kind of an embarrassing place to get a poison ivy rash. Instead, grab the pencil with your gloved hand, scratch your forehead with the eraser, and put it back in your pocket.

Be sure there is an empty washing machine available when you are done. As soon as you are through for the day, wash your clothes and take a shower. The shower isn't really to deal with contact with poison ivy plants (that ship has already sailed) but rather to deal with your probably inevitable contact with contaminated clothing as you take it off. Besides, getting a shower is seldom a bad idea. Just remember: cleanliness is next to Godliness, but don't bother me about it until I get number one down pat.

YOUR WEAPONS

When I go out killing poison ivy, I use three weapons: a good lopping shears, a bow saw that is large enough to carry over my shoulder, and a sprayer of chemical herbicide.

Lopping shears have the advantage over handheld pruning shears in that your hands stay further away from what you are cutting. You want bypass shears that are large enough to cut a vine 1 inch in diameter. You want handles long enough to get good leverage but not so long that they will be cumbersome to carry around in the woods. It helps if the handles are brightly colored (I like yellow), because you will eventually need to set it down and you want to be able to find it again quickly.

A bow saw is good for cutting anything larger than 1 inch or so. It does have the disadvantage that it will generate urushiol-soaked sawdust (so be careful and upwind if possible while you are using it). This disadvantage is easily counterbalanced by the emotional advantage of the sheer joy of watching that plant ripped apart violently. (Okay, maybe that's just me.) Your saw doesn't have to be as sturdy as a saw you would use to cut down a tree. After all, vine wood is much weaker and softer than tree wood. (That one is even in the Bible; see Ezekiel 15.)

And then there's chemical herbicide. Yes, I use it on my own property. I always ask before I use it for someone else. There are people who are opposed to the use of chemical herbicides, and I will respect their wishes. Really, the saw and lopper are your primary weapons; you can really get most poison ivy problems under control without a chemical herbicide. For my part, I am not convinced that there is much risk of harm associated with chemical herbicides when properly used with reasonable attention to safety. If you are concerned, though, don't use them.

I know some people use agricultural strength vinegar mixed with salt and dish detergent.

(Be sure to use agricultural strength vinegar; regular vinegar is ineffective and apple cider vinegar bestows immortality and that's the last thing you want a poison ivy plant to get.) Just keep in mind that agricultural strength vinegar is actually quite a dangerous chemical, even though it is considered non-toxic when diluted. Remember, water in sufficient quantities is actually very dangerous; it's called drowning. I'm not posting a recipe here; you can ask your rectangle of all knowledge and see what it says. I have had limited but definite success with a recipe I got off the Internet. Whether or not it was more effective or safer than a commercial herbicide I leave for others to answer, but I can resist commenting on it: Herbicides are designed to block a particular enzyme that is only found in plants. Agricultural vinegar is used because it kills everything it touches, with salt and detergent added to enhance its ability to achieve total destruction. It's kind of like having to shut down a computer; you can turn it off by pressing the right switch, or you can take a sledgehammer to it and not worry particularly about aiming (and accept that the table it is on will also be destroyed.) Both work, but I know which one I'd rather clean up after.

One method I've seen advocated but I don't use: yanking the plant up by the roots. It probably is quite effective against young plants, but I doubt it will be effective against an established plant with lots of runners. I've never tried, and I've never found that I've needed to try. My main objection to yanking is that it is intentionally contaminating your gloves. Personal protection equipment should always be protection of last resort; a bulletproof vest does not make you Superman. There's a reason why rugby has far fewer injuries than football; I suspect the reliance on protective equipment is somehow involved. If you choose to yank, though, please be very careful (and find a different source of advice for doing it, since I don't have experience here).

I'm sure there are other effective methods for killing poison ivy, but I've never had to resort to them. I have at times been tempted to just cover up a patch of poison ivy with a large cardboard box or a piece of plywood. I've also been tempted to have a goat eat the stuff. (Goats are downright cute, so any excuse to get a goat has to be a good one.) There's a drawback to any method that is not specifically targeting poison ivy, which I will discuss later. Note also that I would strongly caution against the use of power saws, drills, line trimmers, or lawn mowers; these have the effect of spreading urushiol over a wide area (not a good idea).

One last thing to remember: fire and poison ivy don't mix. You don't want to vaporize urushiol. Or if you want to, you shouldn't. That's just nasty.

FIRST OBJECTIVE: REPRODUCING VINES

You need to be ready to play a long game. This is not going to be a quick fix. You might not see much in the way of results the first year, but don't give up. Getting rid of all of the established plants can take a couple years. After that, all that is necessary is to go over the property once a year and get rid of any new seedlings. Think of it as mowing the grass, only you only have to do it once a year. That's the goal. Ready to start heading there? Good.

I'm going to presume at this point that you know basic woodsmanship. There are other dangers in the woods besides poison ivy. Can you spot a hornet's nest? How about a yellow jacket's nest? Do you know what the poisonous snakes in your area look like? Do you know how not to look like a deer during deer hunting season? Can you be careful not to step into an old woodchuck hole that has gotten covered with leaves? (Why did I bring that one up? Don't

ask.) If you think you need help, consider going with someone who knows their way in the woods better than you do. Even if you don't think you need help, consider going with someone who knows their way in the woods better than you do. They're usually fun people to be around anyway. The alternative is to watch *Ernest Goes to Camp* and remember never to do this to a family of badgers.

Now that you're out in the woods, the first step is to confirm the presence of poison ivy. If you don't see any seedlings, congratulations (but be sure to check again next year.) If you do see seedlings, start looking for established plants. Then start looking for strongholds (areas where poison ivy is the dominant if not the only plant.) Once you've found a stronghold, look up. Chances are you will see a reproducing vine on a tree. Occasionally you will find shrubs with berries, but that's rarer. In any case, if you eliminate the source of new seedlings, your major problem will be solved.

(Quick aside: *The Lord of the Rings* is a 1200-page story about a ring getting dropped in a volcano. The actual ring drop is described in a few lines. This handbook is not *The Lord of the Rings* but the whole point is killing the reproducing vine. The rest is just clean-up. With that having been said, let's drop that ring....)



Here is a reproducing vine on a tree that is about to be cut. There are no branches in the way here, but if there were, I would carefully remove them with lopping shears. I find a spot that stands out well from the tree at approximately chest height.



I will then use my bow saw to cut most of the way through the vine. I will then make another cut about 1-2 inches up (or down) from my first cut. I will then cut all the way through but I will be very careful not to cut into the tree bark. I will then finish that first cut. Using the end of the saw, I will then push out a small section of this vine. If it doesn't come out neatly, I can usually pry it out with the open blade of my lopping shears. If absolutely necessary, I can usually slip my bow saw blade between the section and the tree trunk



(And that's it. The ring is down. Your real problem is now gone. Everything after this is just scouring the Shire.)

Why remove the whole section instead of just relying on a single cut? Two reasons: 1) There is great practical value in having a gap in the vine that is visible from far away. You are likely to be walking through this area again next year, and it is helpful to be able to tell at a glance that this is a vine that you have already dealt with. Anyone else will also be able to tell

at a glance that this vine is no longer a problem. And 2) I'll get to in the next section.

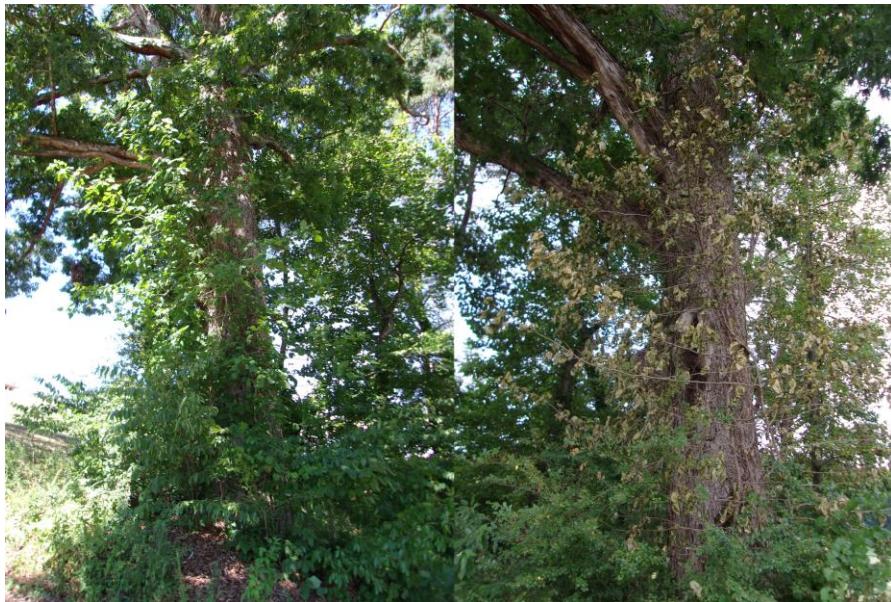
Why chest high? In a word, convenience. You are going to be working hard today, and you want your job to be as convenient as possible. Some might worry that the remaining vine will lead to new growth, but I've never seen that happen. If you want to bend over and cut it right at ground level, go right ahead. Just remember to also cut out a section chest high so you'll actually notice it next time you look at this tree.

I usually let the section of vine that I just remove stay where it lands. It's covered in urushiol, but so is the rest of the area you're standing in. If you are at all worried that somebody will find that section and keep it, you could always bag it up and throw it in the trash somewhere.

Once I've cut a section out of that vine, I look the tree over for any additional vines. Any other reproducing vines can be dispatched the same way with your bow saw. Smaller, non-reproducing vines (that will very soon become reproducing vines) can be given similar treatment with lopping shears. Just remember to cut a 1-2 inch section out if it so you will know at a glance that it has been dealt with. Once you're done with this tree, on to the next. I've never been to a property that had only one reproducing vine, so you've still got work to do.

And, yes, you are walking away from the tree at that point. If you see it the next day, the leaves of the vine will look distinctly wilted. A few days later and the leaves will be dead and dropping off. You might want to warn people not to play in the dead leaves, but other than that, just let nature take its course. If there are any ripe berries on the vine, they will drop off into the soil below. Bummer, but it isn't like there aren't literally hundreds of seeds in the soil already. Just walk away, and leave the vine (and therefore the urushiol) undisturbed. The urushiol will eventually break down, but it takes five years or so for that to happen. Until then, leaving it where it is is probably the safest option.

Do walk past it later to notice the difference. Being able to see the results before and after (such as in the picture below) can be very encouraging. Encouragement is important.



TROPHY HUNTING

Remember the camera? Remember the second reason for removing a section of the vine? Now it is time to have some fun.

If you cut a section out of a particularly large or impressive vine, take a picture of it before disposing of it. Try to take a close up of the cut surface of the section. Use a flash, and try to be sure that it is not blurry.

Later, try to count the tree rings so you can count the rings. It may be difficult to resolve all of them, but you should at least be able to get an approximate age of your vine.

Here's one of mine. I kill poison ivy regularly at a local Bible camp; I thought I had killed all the reproducing vines on their property until I happened upon this beauty. I walked past this vine at least a half-dozen times before noticing it. It had mostly detached from the tree at the bottom, so it looked like an ordinary tree trunk. It wasn't until I looked up that I noticed that it was a reproducing poison ivy vine. Once I made one cut, the vine detached so I couldn't actually cut out a section; since the two ends no longer lined up, I figured I could tell at a glance that it was cut anyway.



I took a picture of the underside of the cut. Here it is:



Note that I've edited the picture by drawing lines on the rings. Every fifth line I draw in purple. My estimation is that this vine was 32 years old. So naturally, I told the people at camp, "I killed a 32 year old...poison ivy vine.". It's fun to say, particularly if you can string out the ellipsis long enough to get people worried. On a more serious note, there's something very appealing about killing an old poison ivy vine. So much of like involves doing tasks to solve problems that will be back tomorrow or next week. Even monthly chores can become drudgery. As such, there's a marvelous sense of accomplishment that comes from solving a problem that has been growing for decades. Eventually, poison ivy slaying will become a once-a-year chore, so it is important and encouraging to remember what happens if you neglect it for long enough.

Oh, and for what it's worth, here is my all-time record (so far):



I'm thinking I can count 35 rings on it. This section was particularly heart-shaped. I can think of a number of awful pranks that I could pull by taking advantage of the heart-shaped nature of the poison ivy vine section, but I'm not going to do it. Really.

SECOND OBJECTIVE: BREAKING UP STRONGHOLDS

I define a stronghold as an area that is largely if not exclusively populated with poison ivy. This is usually right around a reproducing vine (that hopefully you have just found and killed.) There are enough plants in this area that one will inevitably find a tree or other climbing

surface and generate another reproducing vine. You've got some time before this happens, so don't worry about breaking up strongholds until you are reasonably sure that you have eliminated all the reproducing vines.

Keep in mind the long game. You will not be able to eliminate a stronghold in one year, since whatever damage you inflict this year will not prevent it from growing back next year. Patience. You can't win instantly, but you can make substantial progress each year.

I use chemical herbicides here. Be sure to read carefully the manufacturer's directions and follow them. Keep in mind, though: you're not going to be able to get them all. Focus on trying to kill the largest plants. Obviously try to get as many as possible, but don't spread it too thin. It would be better to kill some of the plants than just to annoy them all but not kill any of them.

One thing though: aim properly and carefully. It is very important that you miss any plants that are not poison ivy. You want any other plants in the area to thrive; these plants are your allies, since they will be stealing sunlight and ground water from any poison ivy plants in the area. Keep in mind that if you were to kill all the plants in that area then since poison ivy is a fierce competitor it will tend to grow back quicker than anything else does. Say to yourself as you are spraying, "The weed of my weed is my crop." (That a modified version of an old Arab saying that goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend". My version definitely works here; I'm not too sure of the old Arab saying. I have enemies, and they don't think too much of me. Those enemies also have enemies, but they don't think too much of me either. In fact, even they have enemies, and even they don't take too kindly to me. Okay, maybe there's a reason I'm in a room by myself typing about making war on plants instead of being off at a party somewhere.)

It's worth noticing what the good competitors against poison ivy are in your area. In my area, the best is usually the Virginia creeper. It looks a lot like poison ivy, but it has five leaves instead of three. And no urushiol. It is an important enough competitor that it gets included in one version of the old saying: "Leave of three, let them bee; leaves of five, let them thrive." In any case, you need to be careful spraying around any Virginia creeper you see, even if it means leaving some poison ivy unsprayed. If you can get the Virginia creeper to crowd out the poison ivy, your job will be much easier.

(Oh, and remember what I said about not killing any plants other than poison ivy? I take that back in the case of kudzu. Kudzu is just evil. It's kind of like the plant equivalent of the Weeping Angels from Dr. Who. Kill it wherever you can anyway.)

Do what damage you can, then move on. Remember the location of this stronghold. Next spring, try to catch it right when the first shoots start coming up. Spray those carefully, then if possible come back and spray in a few weeks. Don't overspray, though; you want to be careful to protect the other plants as much as possible.

During the entire first year, it may seem like an impossible task. Second year may still seem daunting, but it at least seems possible. After the third year, the task becomes manageable. You will still have some established plants and seedlings to deal with, but poison ivy will now no longer be the dominant plant in that area. Congratulations, you've broken the stronghold.

THIRD OBJECTIVE: CLEAN UP

If you've gotten rid of all the reproducing vines and strongholds, your poison ivy problem

is essentially reduced to maintenance - the equivalent of mowing your lawn, only with poison ivy. You haven't completely solved your problem, since any established plants just tend to keep coming back for several years before they eventually die. Even then, your problem remains, since the soil around any reproducing vines will still have literally hundreds of seeds in them. Beyond that, you still have a problem of birds bringing new seeds into your area. The price of poison ivy free is eternal vigilance. Besides, it is a good excuse for a walk in the woods.

HOW TO HAVE A POISON IVY RASH

Despite your best efforts, sometimes you get a rash from poison ivy. Proper precaution and experience will minimize the risk, but sometimes you get it nonetheless. I know. As I am typing this sentence, my right arm is itching like the proverbial dickens. There's a generalized itch, but there's only a few spots I can see. It might get worse tomorrow, but I'm pretty sure this will be it.

(Yes, it was poison ivy. It lasted a few days, and then it got better. I've had it a lot worse, but it is never fun when you get it.)

I note that there are many good medical websites out there describing poison ivy. They even have pictures. So I will direct you to one of them for more reliable information than I can provide you. Just avoid looking at the pictures; they'll give you the willies. When in doubt, talk to your doctor.

My experience has been that I have with me at all times a bottle of calamine lotion (or the equivalent) for one to three days after I've been out killing poison ivy. If I am actually going to get it, I will catch myself absentmindedly scratching at an itchy spot. Once I catch myself doing it, I immediately stop. (You don't want to scratch the itch; it will just make it worse.) I apply some lotion on the spot; not that it is really going to help but it will feel good having something to do instead of just itching. I note the spot and check it periodically. It might be nothing, but if it turns into an irregular patch of redness, I start chiding myself for not being more careful. If it starts to develop tiny blisters under the skin, I chide myself even worse. After that, I just try to keep it from getting further irritated, I put some lotion on it when it really bothers me, and I just wait for it to go away. You can't really "treat" a poison ivy rash - once the urushiol gets absorbed onto your skin, you just have to put up with it until it runs its course (usually a week to ten days). Scratching it won't spread the urushiol (I'm told), breaking the blisters won't spread the urushiol, but allowing it to heal undisturbed should diminish both the intensity and the duration of your suffering. Plus, you really don't want it to get infected.

Be sure to seek medical attention if you have a fever, shortness of breath, or any of the other conditions that reliable medical advice websites list. Otherwise, you just have to put up with it.

As you suffer, you might as well consider whether or not there is an upside to having a poison ivy rash. I could consider the spiritual benefits of suffering, but I'm not really sure I'm qualified to do that. My life had been amazingly free of suffering. I'll leave that to the theologians and the pillar saints. I do have one interesting observation about what a poison ivy rash is like....

When you have a poison ivy rash, your skin has a legitimate complaint against you. You can say it was all for the greater good, but that's not going to help your skin. You can assign blame, but again that won't help. Your skin will be loudly complaining that conditions are unacceptable. You already know that, but it won't stop complaining. You try to do something

to show you care, and maybe that reduces the intensity of it but doesn't solve it. Your skin wants you to scratch it, but you know that will not really help. Your skin won't take no for an answer, but you're the one in charge. If you give in, it might feel better for a moment but it will make your skin more miserable afterwards and perhaps do lasting damage. If you lose your composure, it only makes things worse. The nagging continues every waking hour, and might even invade your dreams. You just have to put up with that. You start desperately searching for a way of fixing the situation, but the sad truth is there isn't one and you and your skin are just going to have to accept that. And just when the situation seems beyond hope, things get better. Healing starts on its own without any help from you. Eventually, the problem just goes away, and both you and your skin will take it for granted (until the next time.)

Read that last paragraph again; what does it remind you of? To me, it reminds me of parenthood. Not all of parenthood, certainly. But some situations and some seasons just seem like that. So I consider having a poison ivy rash the to be good preparation and training for at least certain aspects of parenthood. Maybe that's just me, though.

If that idea doesn't help you, try this instead: Say to yourself, "What doesn't kill me makes me stronger. Chocolate doesn't kill me. Therefore chocolate makes me stronger." And then go get some chocolate. It won't help the itch, but it might get your mind off it. Best I can offer.

A BRIEF ASIDE ABOUT AN UNPOPULAR TOPIC

Once you get good at spotting poison ivy, it starts to become difficult not to spot poison ivy. You'll start seeing it everywhere. With that knowledge comes a temptation...

I face that temptation just about every day at my house. You see, on the other side of the street is a huge poison ivy vine growing in a wooded area. It is spreading seeds all throughout the neighborhood, I'm sure. When I find a seedling on my property, it is hard not to imagine it came from that one blasted vine. I would be overjoyed to be given the opportunity to kill it. My problem is that it is not on my property. I know most of the neighbors, but I don't know the owner of that particular piece of property. I don't have permission to be on that land; still less do I have permission to kill anything on it. But then again, who'd know it was me? Our street is not heavily trafficked, so the chances that anyone would spot me are minimal. I could make it look like an accident. Surely I would be making the world a better place by just doing what I'm tempted to do. More than likely, the owner wouldn't mind. The ends justify the means, right? (Or so I'm tempted to tell myself).

And so we encounter a topic that few like to talk about: authority. (There are a few people that go on and on about it; I try to avoid them whenever possible.) I kill poison ivy on my land because I have the authority as property owner to do so. Poison ivy is not an endangered species with legal protection. I am not using radioactive isotopes to kill poison ivy (which would be illegal I'm sure). Any other legitimate authority over me is okay with my poison ivy killing activities. When I go on someone else's property to kill poison ivy, it is always with their permission and according to their directives. Anything else would entail trespassing or worse. So I don't do it.

Once you decide you have the authority to just do whatever you think is for the greater good for others, it is hard to stop. Once you decide you know what is best for others so that you can override their decisions and their wishes, you're well on your way to becoming a terrible

person. You tell yourself that you can break the rules just this once, but domination and defiance are powerfully addictive. Far better to learn to live by the rules and under legitimate authority, even if it means having to kill poison ivy seedlings on your own property once a year.

I learned this lesson early from my dad. I noticed a poison ivy plant on a tree in a house in our neighborhood, and asked if he was going to kill it. He replied that it wasn't his vine. He pointed out that the person who owned that property might like it. That made no sense to me. So he pointed out that some people might think that the shiny leaves are pretty. I remember dropping the subject at that point, but I said to myself, "Some people are into the oddest things."

Many decades later I start to see the sense of that point of view. As I've been getting older, I more and more can appreciate the sheer beauty of the sound of the phrase "Get off my lawn." Somehow nothing says "get off my lawn" quite as dramatically as a lawn full of poison ivy plants. (Okay, there's a plant that is found in the Mario video games that might say it better. I want some of those on my lawn someday.) There's a reason that people grow rose bushes and holly bushes around the windows of their house. I'm not sure that's always nice, but it is their prerogative. My dad didn't explain it to me in those terms back then, but I'm sure he thought it.

So I'm thankful that I get to walk past someone else's poison ivy plant on a regular basis. It gives me the opportunity over and over again to choose not to become a monster. I trust you will make wise choices as well when faced with these sort of temptations.

(Okay, here's where I should admit that I don't always live up to my own convictions. This past year I spotted a kudzu vine growing up a tree a few feet away from the neighbor's poison ivy vine I just described. I ripped it down with a pole saw. My pole saw was long enough so that I never trespassed on the neighbor's property. Still, I did it. Maybe I am becoming a monster. Have to watch that.)

ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR OWN POISON IVY PROBLEM UNDER CONTROL

Once your battle against poison ivy has reached the "just killing the new seedling" stage, you will have time on your hands and a lot of good experience. Consider putting it to good use. I did.

For a few years, I have been taking on the task of controlling the poison ivy problem at a couple of Christian camps in my area. These are camps that are doing good in our community; they offer a message of hope to kids along with a lot of good outdoor fun. I care passionately that kids be able to enjoy their time there without getting a rash that sucks all the fun out of their experience. I am not in a position to help these camps out in other ways, so I just try to make this one problem go away so they can focus on more important things.

I've also helped some other individuals and families with their poison ivy problem. It's fun to be generous; it's good for you when you can help out others.

I note that I always offer my services for free. Not that I'm averse to making money and not that I doubt that this is legitimate work. I just note that my not accepting money or equivalent compensation means that I'm safe from a four-letter word that strikes fear in the hearts of otherwise bold men and women nationwide. What word? (Brace yourself) OHSA! That's right; by not performing this service for money I can prevent it from being an occupation. My activities here are not under the jurisdiction of the Occupational Health and Safety Administration. I have no idea of how they would regulate me if I was actually earning a paycheck doing this, but I don't have to worry about that. Just turn around and walk away,

OHSA; you have no power here.

(Note that I'm a U.S. citizen, so I worry about OSHA. How Canada deals with this is beyond my imagination. You might want to find out if you sing "Oh Canada" at sports events.)

There's another reason I offer my services for free: If I were doing this for money, the person paying me would have a legitimate authority to interfere with the way I do it. I know how to do what I do, and I know how to minimize the risk to myself. I don't want to have to test out someone else's ideas. I'm open to suggestions, but I really don't want to have to put myself at risk. By doing it as a favor, I can do it my way as long as I work within their boundaries and give a good account of my activities to them. (In case you haven't noticed, this is also why I am offering you this document for free: I don't want to have to be called into account for the way I write. I'm writing for free, so I can say whatever I want. I think tapioca pudding is abominable. You probably didn't need to know that, but I'm saying it anyway so there. You can't complain you're not getting your money's worth.)

There are rewards more important than monetary rewards, and killing poison ivy can offer that in a particularly special way. I quote the words of Jesus from Matthew 6:3-4 (NIV) "But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you." So consider: by killing a reproducing vine you are preventing birds from eating those berries and carrying those seeds who knows where. Poison ivy plants that otherwise would be planted will not in fact be planted. Patches of poison ivy that otherwise might give rashes won't be there to spread. The people who would otherwise have gotten poison ivy won't realize what they have been spared from because of your gift to them. (They might not be needy in the traditional sense, but I'm thinking that a person with a poison ivy rash has a very definite need regardless of their economic or social status). Left hand has no idea what the right hand just did, so secrecy is preserved. This gift I offer ultimately to my Heavenly Father, who sees what might otherwise have been. It makes me happy knowing that He sees it.

Admittedly, my activity makes me happy for another reason too:

I don't like birds.

(Just kidding.)

AUTHOR'S AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed reading this document; I certainly enjoyed writing it. I offered it to you without cost and without obligation, and I'm not altering the deal now. (If you paid someone else for this document, that's between the two of you; I had nothing to do with that.) Still, I think I've been nice enough to you that just maybe I've earned the right to have you listen to a quick charitable donation sales-pitch: If you found this document to be informative or entertaining, consider imagining what you might otherwise have paid for a document like this, divide it in two, and pretty please think about donating that amount to an organization that gets kids outdoors enjoying nature. If you don't know any of those, put it in a church offering plate or donate it to some other worthy cause. That's entirely up to you. Your choice, but I'd really appreciate it. There are a lot of wonderful, underfunded organizations out there, and I'd like to do what I can for some of them.

What I'm really hoping, though, is that someone who reads this will decide to volunteer helping out with controlling the poison ivy situation at a camp or other organization that gets

kids outdoors enjoying nature. Or some other worthy place; that's entirely up to you. The people who run these places make the world a better place, and if you can take one worry away from them and let them focus on other things, that's huge. A weekend afternoon or two a year can make a huge difference. I recommend it highly.

APPENDIX 1 - SPOT THE POISON IVY ANSWER KEY



APPENDIX 2 - QUESTIONS TO ASK

You're volunteering to help someone deal with a poison ivy problem. What should you say to them? What should you ask?

- Where should I not go?
- Are you good friends with your neighbors?
- Any dangers I should be aware of?
- How's your cell phone signal? (Check)
- Have you noticed any wasp nests in your area? (Look for them) Poisonous snakes? Venomous spiders? Revenuers?

Some things you should communicate:

- You are doing this not for pay or any cash equivalent services. You're using your own tools and supplies. You would appreciate access to a bathroom and a source of drinking water.
- You assume the risk for your own activities. If you get bit by a copperhead, you would appreciate help getting to an ambulance, but then after that you wouldn't mind getting laughed at. You take a dim view of your host sneaking up behind you and whacking you upside the head with a two by four, only it is okay as long as he yells "mosquito" as he does it.
- You're not offering any guarantee that poison ivy won't come back. In fact, if there's a reproducing vine in the area, it will definitely grow back. You're here to get them started, but ultimately it's their land and their problem.

NEW CONTACT:

- Where's the bathroom?
- Can I get someone to show me the prpertyline and anythign else i need to know about keeping self safe?
- How do you feel about Roundup?
- I'm going to leave the vines on the tree. Are you okay with that?
- Do you understand this is going to take years? If so, great; let's get started....