

Poison Ivy: The Baleful Weed
by Wayne Winterrowd

Looked at objectively, *Rhus radicans* is an excellent plant. More widely known by its popular name, poison ivy, it belongs to a distinguished family, the Anacardiaceae, which includes mangoes (*Mangifera indica*), pistachios (*Pistacia verna*) and the signature genus of the family, cashew nuts (*Anacardium occidentale*). Its own genus, *Rhus*, bears a name assigned by ancient Greek botanists, who knew a close relative as a culinary plant, the acid seed of which is still used in Syrian and Lebanese cooking as one of the ingredients - with olive oil, thyme and oregano - of Zaatar, a special fragrant bread. The genus is widely distributed throughout the temperate and subtropical regions of both hemispheres, and one or another member of it has been put to almost every economic use, providing, variously, cooked greens, spices, cooling beverages, tanning, dyestuffs, medicinal substances, varnishes and - in the oriental species *R. verniciflua* - fine Japanese lacquer.

It seems the birthright of the genus that almost every one of its members is attractive. None of them bear showy flowers, but their forms, whether of tree, shrub or climbing plant, are usually very graceful, and the autumn coloration assumed by those native to temperate northern regions can take on a brilliance unrivaled by other deciduous plants. Particularly stunning is *Rhus typhina*, the staghorn sumac that faces down woodland edges and quickly colonizes waste and degraded ground throughout Eastern North America. After its pinnate leaves, brilliantly tinted with scarlet, maroon and pumpkin orange have fallen, its conical, densely packed seedheads persist well into winter, just the dull purple color and the texture of Victorian plush upholstery. Native Americans knew that those seed heads could be steeped in water and strained through coarse cloth to render a rose-colored liquid as acid as lemon juice, a knowledge they passed on to early colonists, who called it "vinegar tree," and later, "lemonade tree," sweetening a strained infusion of its seed heads to make a refreshing beverage at autumn haying time.

As ornamental plants, various species of *Rhus* have been much more valued in England and in France than in North America, for they provide a vividness of autumn color not often matched by small trees, shrubs and vines native to Europe. *Rhus radicans*, our own poison ivy, was no exception here, for John Tradescant the younger (1608-1662), royal gardener to Charles I, maintained for several years a specimen in the King's collection that had

been sent from Virginia. The intensity of its autumn coloration was much admired, and presumably, in an age where experience of the plant world was fantastically expanding, even its toxic properties would more likely have excited wonder than fear. That might not be a mood shared by any hiker in the woods of North America now, though objective observers are certainly struck by the beauty of the plant with its thick, rope-like stems tightly clasping the trunks of trees to a height of perhaps 30 feet, its lush, tripartite leaves, usually glossy above and fealty beneath, thickly borne on short, out-facing stems, and its autumn color, unrivaled by any maple, beech or oak.

Viewed strictly from a landscape point-of-view, *Rhus radicans* has everything. With a geographic range extending from Canada to Mexico and coast to coast, it can flourish where winter lows reach -30 degrees Fahrenheit as readily as where they hover above 40 degrees. It is adaptable to an astonishingly wide range of conditions, from salty, Cape Cod beaches to exhausted pasture and high, rocky passes, though it makes its finest growth in rich, river-bottom land, where it can climb. Lacking support, however, it is just as content scrambling over the ground, creating a hummocky cover about two feet high that suppresses most competing vegetation. Connoisseurs of the plant will like it best, perhaps, as an accidental "tree," a form that occurs when it has grown for years on a host trunk that subsequently died and decayed, leaving its thickened ropes of stem to stand alone and branch out at the top. Such specimens may be of great age, extending their lives by perhaps a hundred years longer than the sturdy maple or oak that once supported their ascent upwards. No one knows, actually, where the oldest specimen of poison ivy might be found, or whether, indeed, huge thickets represent many plants sprouted from dull white, berry-like seeds, or one single plant of immemorial age, rooting wherever it touched ground.

Most people would think, as with the habits of cockroaches, that such questions are very low on the list of topics to be investigated. Certainly most Americans have considered the plant more an object of fear than of admiration, because poison ivy and two cousins in its genus (the western species, poison oak, *Rhus diversiloba*, and the swamp-growing *R. vernix*, poison sumac) are unusual among North American plants in creating severe dermatitis on contact. There are many European plants that possess this property, some even cultivated in gardens, such as the giant cow parsley native to the Caucasus mountains, *Heracleum mantegazzianum*, with its handsome, three foot wide leaves, or *Dictamnus albus*, the dittany or gas

plant, so called because its leaves throw off a cloud of gas that may be ignited on a still summer night. Both may cause painful inflammations in susceptible people, particularly when contact occurs on a hot, sunny day. But no other North American plant outside the genus *Rubus* can cause so much pain, and to so many people. Nor need contact be prolonged, or even direct. Dermatitis, caused by a viscous sap exuded by all parts of the plant, can occur through petting a dog or cat who has roamed through low-growing stands, from one's shoes or clothing or those of someone else, or even from pollen or the particles of leaves borne on smoke from autumn burn piles. Therefore, children are taught to be wary in the woods and fields, their rambles made edgy by keeping a look-out, always, for the familiar, three-part leaf. Still, few adults have escaped contact with the plant, and the resulting discomfort, which can range from mild to excruciating, can in rare cases even be fatal.

It is a curious thing, therefore, that Native Americans appear to be exempt from the discomforts inflicted by poison ivy. Indeed, they valued it for many uses, and collected it as part of their seasonal response to the natural world. Its boiled leaves produced a valuable and permanent dyestuff of a deep, rich black used for clothing and for woven ornamentation on blankets. The stems of procumbent plants were gathered, stripped of their leaves and woven into sturdy baskets while they were still green and pliant. Stronger stems could be sharpened for use as skewers on which to roast bits of game over an open fire. And the leaves, particularly when lush and broad, could be employed to wrap whole chunks of meat, providing both moistening and a pleasant acid taste, rather as grape leaves are used in Mediterranean cooking. Such intimate contact with the plant, including ingestion of its sap, would have proved acutely uncomfortable to European settlers, and even perhaps fatal. A curious mind would want to know what made the difference.

I have a small personal story, which, though it is not meant to provide an example or therapeutic model, is at least of interest. As a child, I was fair-skinned and blonde, and much given to roaming in vacant lots and the cotton fields that still then surrounded Shreveport, Louisiana where I grew up. Somewhere around the age of eight, I contracted a particularly virulent case of poison ivy, worst on the softest parts of my body, the insides of my thighs, my genitals, my armpits, eyelids. The situation was serious enough for me to be taken to the family doctor, who prescribed patience and soothing lotions. It was something that would just have to run its course. To me, a child, that remedy seemed hopeless. I was miserable. In this crisis, my

maternal grandmother took me over. Born thirty years after the Civil War, she grew up in east Texas, in the close companionship of a woman whose mother was black and whose father was a full Chickasaw. Both my grandmother and this woman, whose name was Alice, left east Texas together, and though both married and had children, they lived more-or-less in a state of mutual dependency all their lives. Mistress and servant, they were really best friends, and into very old age, neither could do without the other, and neither felt less for that.

In my childish eyes, Alice could do everything. She knew how to pluck chickens, make soap from bacon fat and lye, cook almost anything so it was good, draw poison from a boil with the membrane of an egg, resuscitate a dying chick with her own breath, and make delicious pies out of almost any berries I picked. So it was Alice who took on my cure. She gathered a large paper bag of poison ivy leaves from up and down the scrappy back alleys of that part of Shreveport, which she then boiled in an old pot. They looked just like turnip greens, but didn't smell so good, and when they were a thick dark green mass, she wrung out the juice with her hands and stored it in a mason jar. I was then given one drop of this vile green liquid in a full glass of water the first day, two drops the second, three the third, and on up to ten, for ten days. Those last days it tasted nasty, but a certain trust in her, and the slightly conspiratorial relationship of sharing ancient wisdom into which we had entered, made me get it down.

Half a century has passed since I drank those ten glasses on hot August mornings, each of which tasted more green than could be nice. In the interim, much of my life has been spent outdoors, in gardens and rural places all over North America. I have never had even a slight case of poison ivy, though I have seen it as I went, brushed against it, worked in soils where its toxic roots must certainly have still been present, maybe even inhaled particles of it as it burned on autumn brush fires. Some day I may be taken down in my vaunt that I was made "immune" to poison ivy as a child. Then this story would have to be revised.

But the properties of plants and their uses to humanity, though they are perhaps among the most ancient branches of medical inquiry, still seem to offer us a largely uncharted territory. Much has clearly been learned and then known, then forgotten, and now waits to be relearned. First we re-invent our pleasures, and then we seek a solution to our woes. Sometimes we

do both at once. Who is to say, then, whether *Rhus radicans* - poison ivy - cannot still offer both? The Indians knew its quotidian utility, and benefits even well beyond their knowledge may yet be discovered.

Besides, it is a very pretty garden plant, particularly in the rare cream-and-green variegated version.

Author Bio: Wayne Winterrowd was one of New England's most versatile landscape designers. His understanding of seasonal rhythms and his passion for plants underlies his partnership of over 30 years with Joe Eck in North Hill Garden Design Associates in Readsboro, Vermont. Their recent books include *A Year at North Hill: Four Seasons in a Vermont Garden*, *Living Seasonally: The Kitchen Garden* and *The Table at North Hill*. In 2003, with artist Pamela Stagg, he published *Roses: A Celebration*. Mr. Winterrowd died unexpectedly in [September 2010](#) after a short illness.