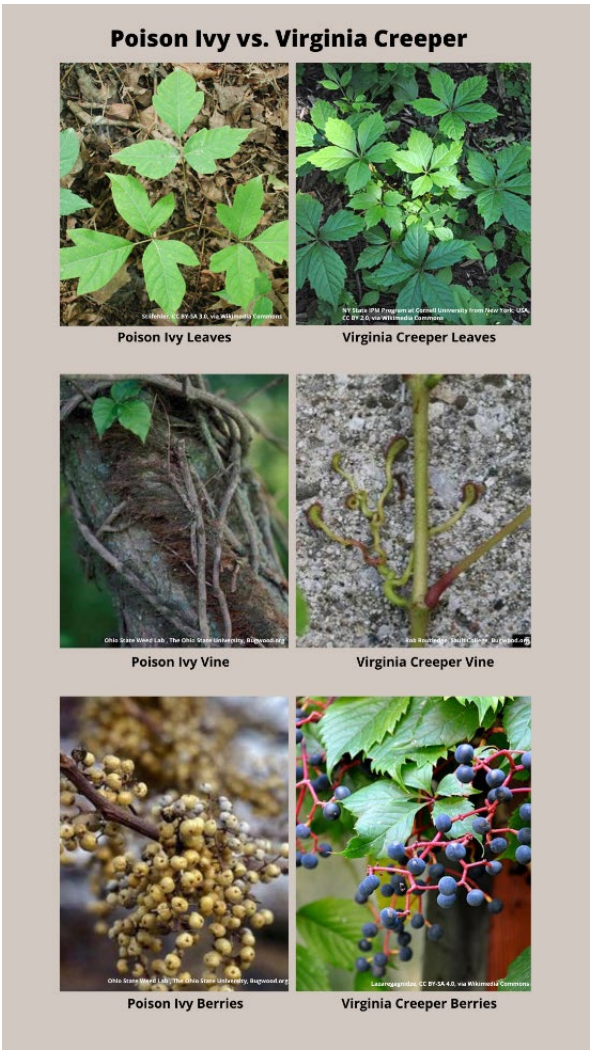
Virginia Creeper vs. Poison Ivy

Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) is frequently mistaken for poison ivy. Although it doesn't cause a rash like poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*), the leaves of Virginia creeper have needle-shaped calcium oxalate crystals (raphides) that may cause skin irritation after handling the plant. Unfortunately, we gardeners sometimes suffer consequences for tending our gardens. That doesn't keep us from getting back out there again and again.

Let's walk through how to tell the difference between poison ivy and Virginia creeper and how to control them.



Leaves

Poison ivy has three glossy leaflets. The middle leaflet is larger and on a longer stem. The edges of the leaves may be lobed. In the fall, poison ivy's leaves turn yellow or red. The leaves contain urushiol, the oil that causes contact dermatitis.

Virginia creeper has five leaflets with dull surfaces. However, they may have three leaflets when they first emerge, with the fourth and fifth appearing as they grow. Each leaflet is about the same length and radiates from the center on equal-length stems. The edges of the leaflets are serrated. Virginia creeper leaves will turn brilliant red in the fall with enough sunlight.

Vines

The vines of poison ivy are hairy and do not have tendrils. The hairs on the vines adhere to surfaces and allow them to climb as it grows. The vines also contain urushiol. In the winter, after the leaves have dropped from poison ivy, it can be identified by the dead hairy vines wrapped around the surface it grew on.

Virginia creeper vines are smooth with long tendrils that end in oval discs that cling to surfaces. These clinging discs can damage stucco, brick, and painted surfaces.

Flowers & Berries

Greenish-yellow clusters of blossoms appear on poison ivy in the spring. These produce off-white berries in late summer that turn white in the fall.

The flowers of Virginia creeper are inconspicuous. In addition to the leaves, Virginia creeper's dark blue berries on bright orange-brown stems are an excellent way to distinguish it from poison ivy. The berries contain oxalic acid and are moderately toxic to humans and pets if eaten.

The berries of both plants are a food source for birds and wildlife.

Management & Control

Poison ivy will not tolerate repeated tilling, cutting, or mowing. Mowing poison ivy that grows in the lawn is an effective way to control it. Dig up small infestations of young plants in moist soil. Place a plastic bag over your hand and forearm; then, grab pliers with your "bagged" hand and pull up the vine from ground level (you want as much of the roots as possible). Invert the bag over the vine for disposal. To avoid skin contact, whether mowing, cutting, or digging poison ivy, wear rubber gloves, long sleeves, and long pants tucked into socks. Wash any tools used, and carefully remove and wash the gloves and clothing afterward. The urushiol can be transferred from the tools and clothing to your skin.

Herbicides labeled for poison ivy are an effective chemical method of control. Soak the leaves thoroughly with a 41% solution of glyphosate (a non-selective herbicide that kills anything it contacts). Herbicides containing 2,4-D in combination with dicamba and triclopyr applied when the leaves are fully grown are also effective. A good control measure is for products with the single active ingredient triclopyr applied on fully developed leaves. Repeated applications may be necessary, but it can be managed.

On the other hand, a Virginia creeper can regrow after extensive damage to its foliage. It is most effectively controlled with applications of a 1% solution of glyphosate (a non-selective herbicide that kills anything it contacts). Spot treat the leaves in mid-late summer until the fall color begins. Use the "cut-stump" method in late summer or early fall for the best results. Cut the plant to the ground and apply the glyphosate solution to the stumps immediately after cutting.

These chemicals can damage trees, shrubs, and other desirable plants. Use these products in the right conditions, on a calm day, using the correct application methods recommended on the product label. A dishwashing wand-type applicator with a sponge tip is an excellent tool for this job. (Reserve this sponge for herbicide use only.) Use an empty can to carry a small amount of herbicide and the sponge wand as you search for these persistent vines. Dispose of remaining herbicides as recommended on the product label. Sponge application is safer than spraying since you won't need to worry about overspray reaching desirable plants. Always wear the personal protective equipment as directed on the herbicide label and follow all usage instructions.

Learn more about controlling poison ivy and Virginia creeper at these links:

"Controlling Poison Ivy in the Landscape," University of Georgia Extension.
https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=C867-10&title=Controlling%20Poison%20Ivy%20in%20the%20Landscape

"Getting the Upper Hand on Virginia creeper," Rutgers Cooperative Extension.
https://plant-pest-advisory.rutgers.edu/getting-the-upper-hand-on-virginia-creeper/