

Plant Lovers Almanac

For: May 31, 2014

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It is a most wonderful time of the year, here in Ohio - and from coast to coast. In New York recently I was re-acquainted with the glories of Big Apple life from rooftop gardens to the High Line Park, with the elm allee in Central Park to honeylocusts patterned against craned-neck views of skyscrapers. In California for my daughter Sara's graduation from Berkeley with a PhD in political science (what else?) we were treated with everything from bougainvillea to wild mustards to – poison oak. At Silver Creek Metro Parks here in northeast Ohio I met our mystery tree of the week – and also, alas, the nasty angry new leaves of - poison ivy.

Poisons in Paradise. *Toxicodendron*. This appropriately named genus of plants includes *Toxicodendron diversilobum* or Western poison oak and *Toxicodendron radicans*, our familiar Eastern poison ivy. Also in the genus is poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*). All are, somewhat surprisingly to our sensibilities, in the cashew family, the Anacardiaceae.

To quote myself years ago in the *Almanac*:

“Gardens and woodlands are a source of great beauty and wonder – and – occasionally hazards. One of the less pleasant episodes that about 85% of us experience as counterpoints in our plant-loving lives, is that unholy trinity of poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac, or at least in terms of our local un-favorite a different trinity of “leaves of three – let it be” relative to poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) “. So as you hike in local parks later today, pay attention and consider whether you prefer shorts or long trousers when you go a wanderin’.

At Silver Creek on Memorial Day, we noticed that a kind soul had lessened the chance of exposure in the picnic area for trees near our picnic table: poison ivy plants at the base were treated with an herbicide while the greening creeping up the tree was truncated by cutting off the vines and their connection to its roots. Very effective. Trees further from the table were left *au naturel*, as is certainly necessary from a prioritization standpoint. Out in California with poison oak, we were scrabbling down a slope when we found ourselves grasping for a most unhelping tri-fingered hand. Fortunately we were near water, and washed away the offending urushiol oils that give rise to the allergic reaction to *Toxicodendron*.

Urushiol is the key. If you touch the vine (even in the winter) or a pet that has oil on its fur or if you have gloves with oil on them, your immune system may respond with a rash. Even urushiol particles in smoke may cause a reaction, often the worst of all if inhaled into your lungs.

So what to do about poison ivy? When you know you were exposed and can do something quickly, wash off with plenty of tepid water. This is what we did with our exposure to poison oak in California, though the water was quite cold. No rashes a week later, so we escaped. If exposure was a few hours previous, dab at areas with rubbing alcohol, as this is thought to inhibit the immune response. If you get to the rash and itch phase, there are crèmes and ointments that help with the itching and if the problem is severe there are corticosteroids that doctors prescribe to interfere with the allergic reaction. If the problem is bad, and especially if you have inhaled urushiol-laced smoke, consult your physician.

Name That Plant Contests. Our last mystery plant was a common disturbed area maple, box elder (*Acer negundo*). Its trifoliate or five-leaflet (giving rise to the name ash-leaved maple) leaves sometimes confuse people, but you can know it as a maple by the fact that box elder produces the familiar helicopter-like fruits characteristic of all maples. There were two early-bird winners for the May 17 contest: Shane Lowrey and Diane Barton.

Our new mystery plant is a native tree which has glossy green spring and summer leaves and fabulous fall foliage color of intense scarlets and sometimes oranges and yellows. It is not familiar to most for its flowers, which is why I have chosen this picture of its recent blossom opening at Silver Creek.

Remember, Shakespeare wrote: “In Nature’s infinite book of secrecy a little I can read”. So, the winner’s prize (first to text or e-mail me at chatfield.1@osu.edu) shall be a nature book – I am pondering the selection for this round. Some contestants who are correct but not first to be correct lament that they do not get their paper until after 7:00. Remember though, the article is on ohio.com

For A Pleasant Finale. Let us put our poison pen above behind us, this hazard of horticulture, this nastiness of nature. Go enjoy the spectacular flowers of rhododendrons, the hybrids of our native flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*) and Chinese dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) developed at Rutgers University, the bees buzzing among a wild variety of nectar-producing flowers, the next round of magnolias to bloom, and the ingenuity of people everywhere finding a way to garden. Enjoy the wild exuberance of the natural and horticulture world. Experience all, ever anew.

“Having seen something once, we may suddenly in double-take *see* it for the first time. Jolted by the delicate blossoms falling from Shirley Kaufman’s jacaranda, *the tree making us / look again*, we may think twice in a moment of recognition, even act on it. – John Felstiner. From “Can Poetry Save the Earth?”.

Finally, why so many literary allusions in the Almanac? Rachel Carson says it well: “The aim of science is to discover and illuminate truth. And that, I take it, is the aim of literature.”