From mosquitoes to ticks to poison ivy, nature has ways of getting under your skin. Can you identify your enemies?

Why We Itch

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

My older brother Bob, according to family legend, holds the world record for the worst case of poison ivy ever documented. Coincidentally, I have great childhood memories of poison ivy, the plant that made my brother look like a piece of lasagna for at least two weeks.

The year was 1970. It was the second day of our family fishing trip when I glanced up to see Bob marching out to the pier where I was fishing. He announced he was leading an expedition into the unexplored woods behind the cabin. As the youngest brother, I wasn't invited. Bob felt it was his obligation to tell me this before leaving for the woods.

According to his report upon his return, and from information later pieced together, somewhere near an old dump in the woods Bob encountered a tree surrounded by plants with oily leaves—and the leaves were often grouped in threes.

I didn't realize it at the time, but the next few weeks would represent the greatest chapter of my childhood. By the next day Bob developed a red, itchy rash, followed in later days by massive blisters that oozed everywhere. Four days after returning from his expedition, Bob's arms and most of his body had become a gross wasteland of skin affliction. I recall my older brother staggering around the cabin in mummy-like bandages, moaning in defeated agony.

As family vacations go, it was perfect.

What's more, I soon learned I was not particularly sensitive to urushiol, the sappy substance found in poison ivy which causes allergic reactions for many people. I spent my childhood brushing against poison ivy leaves, even walking barefoot through patches, without ill effects.

But not all of us are so lucky. And, as fate would have it, there are plenty of other skin enemies outdoors waiting to bite, sting or generally irritate anyone unlucky enough to contact the enemy.

How well can you recognize the skin dangers outdoors?

Following Bob's convalescence, my father escorted all of us outdoors for a refresher course in poison ivy identification. This time, Bob paid attention.

Poison ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*) is one of the most notorious skin irritants found outdoors. Oily "leaves of three" are typical identification traits.

Poison ivy

Poison ivy has three leaves—but not always. The shape of the leaves is somewhat variable, and appears both with and without serrations and lobes. The plant can grow as a vine clinging to tree trunks, or as sprawling ground cover. Sometimes the plant appears almost bush-like. While these variations cause some confusion, folk myths and individual experiences also distort the facts surrounding poison ivy.

Some people clearly possess some tolerance for urushiol—but tolerance can change throughout a lifetime. Even when leaves vanish in winter, the vines and roots still contain urushiol, and handling them anytime in any season is risky.

(Photo by Hansell F. Cross.)

Among the contenders for worst skin irritants found in Illinois are the tiny larva of the six-legged mites commonly known as chiggers. A victim of chiggers never knows what bit him or her until it's too late. A few hours after returning from a hike through grassy or brush-filled areas in southern Illinois (chiggers are basically a southern scourge), a hiker will begin itching around the socks, waistband or other snug areas where the microscopic larva drew blood then dropped off. Contrary to popular belief, chiggers do not burrow under the skin and remain there. Chiggers can be easily prevented, however, since their repulsion to DEET-containing products makes prevention as simple as a precautionary spray. Dusting one's socks or pants legs with sulphur dust also thwarts chigger attacks.

Ticks are most notorious as blood-suckers and disease carriers, but their bites can also result in itchy reactions. And while many people experience itching for a few days following a tick bite, that itching doesn't automatically indicate a serious tick-borne illness. Know that any rash or swelling that appears within a couple of days after a tick bite is most likely a temporary, allergic response people experience following any number of insect bites. The most fearsome tick-borne illnesses, including Lyme Disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Human Ehrlichiosis, don't produce noticeable symptoms until several days or weeks after the bite.

So-called "seed ticks" rival chiggers for itchy, multiple bites around ankles and waistbands. But there is a slight misconception about the "seed tick." All species of ticks begin life as tiny larvae, then grow into nymphs, then into mature ticks. When ticks are at the nymph stage they're what people call "seed ticks," which some people mistakenly believe to be a separate species. But seed ticks are simply young ticks—of any species. And it's at that stage when the young ticks seek their first blood meal before maturing into adults.

Since the nymphs rarely disperse very far from the spot where they began life, two hikers walking a few feet apart might have vastly different encounters

Wood nettle

Wood nettle, also known as stinging nettle, occurs in moist lowlands and features tiny white spines that produce a burning sensation when touched.

Spotted touch-me-not

A folk remedy for wood nettle irritation suggests rubbing the affected skin with juices from jewel weed, also known as spotted touch-me-not.

with seed ticks. One hiker might brush against dozens of tiny ticks and later find dozens of bites, while the other hiker might escape tick bites entirely. Permanone-based tick repellents can be quite effective. However, DEET alone (which is great for mosquitoes and chiggers) isn't recommended as an effective prevention against ticks.

(Photo courtesy of INHS.)

Mosquitoes and their notoriously itchy bites probably need little introduction here, since the arrival of the mosquito-borne West Nile Virus in Illinois in recent years made the mosquito a high-profile enemy everywhere. Although outdoorsmen headed for mosquito-infested areas always remember to apply repellent first, remember that mosquitoes can be as close to home as in your gutters or backyard buckets. A bite from a West-Nile infected mosquito, therefore, might be as close as outside your bedroom window. Fortunately, draining any water found in old tires, stagnant birdbaths, etc. can significantly reduce the number of mosquitoes around your home.

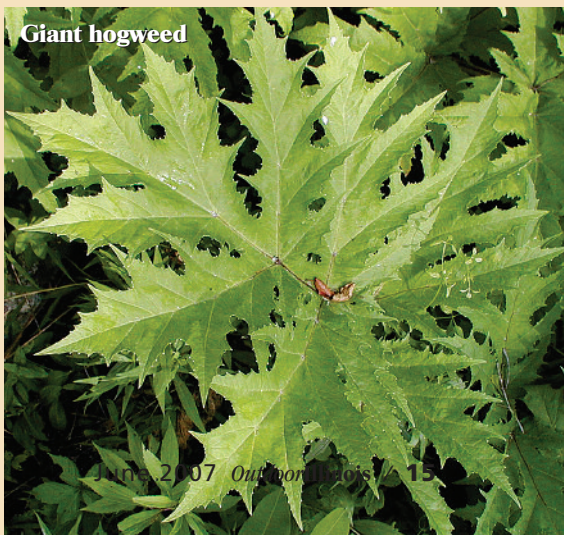
As if all of these itch-causing foes weren't enough outdoors, one plant tops them all for instant agony. Wood nettle (*Laportea canadensis*), also known as stinging nettle, is a deceptively ordinary-looking annual plant found along creeks and lowlands. The deltoid-shaped leaf has rounded serrations but blends in as "just another plant" amid the lush greenery around creeks and streams. What most victims don't notice until it's too late are the tiny, needle-like spines covering the stems and other plant parts—and those spines contain the equivalent of tiny bee stings. While the burning sensation of stinging nettle dissipates within a few minutes, the intense discomfort it produces leaves a memorable impression.

But there's a natural antidote, some say: Many hikers utilize the sap from spotted touch-me-not (*Impatiens capensis*), also known as jewel weed, to relieve the burning of stinging nettles. The handy antidote often grows near stinging nettle. Therefore, whenever one encounters the colorful orange flowers of the "antidote," they must be aware of the potential for wood nettles nearby.

(Photo by Terry English.)

Among the newest botanical threats to human skin is a member of the parsnip family known as giant hogweed (*Heracleum mantegazzianum*). The foreign invader recently appeared in northern Illinois as an aggressive exotic species which outcompetes native plants. But equally fearsome is the sap of the plant, which can produce painful blisters and rashes following sunlight exposure. Yellow parsnip (*Pastinaca sativa*), another exotic common in central to northern Illinois, also can produce nasty dermatitis when skin comes in contact with its sap.

Among the thousands of species of flora and fauna known to exist in Illinois, relatively few pose risks to humans. And while a handful can be notoriously aggravating—such as poison ivy was for my brother—knowing one's enemies is the best prevention.



Giant hogweed

(Photo by Donna R. Ellis, University of Connecticut.)