

POISONOUS PLANTS

Sequoia National Forest



This is information about a few of the most commonly encountered plants that cause skin reactions. These are not all of the poison plant known to occur on the Sequoia National Forest. Individual reactions to these plants, and other plants known to be toxic, vary among individuals.



POISON OAK

Toxicodendron diversilobum

DESCRIPTION:

Poison oak is a common plant, native to the foothills. It can vary widely in form and size from an erect shrub or

tree to a climbing vine from 1 to 12 feet in height. Leaves are deciduous (shed in the fall) alternate, pinnately compound in groups of 3 (rarely 5). The 3 leaflets are generally ovate (egg-shaped) often with wavy to occasionally highly lobed margins. Leaf color is reddish-green in the early spring, turning mostly shiny, dark green soon after, and eventually bright red in the fall. Stems and new twigs are somewhat hairy and light brown to tan to reddish in color. Climbing vines may have tendrils and lack stalks on the lateral leaflets. Flowers are small, whitish-green, yellowish or brownish, borne in loose, long-stemmed clusters. Fruits are small, round, grayish-white, berry-like drupes, which persist after the leaves have fallen.

HABITAT and RANGE: Poison oak occurs in many habitats varying from moist to dry, sunny or shady slopes, often on disturbed sites or near streams and rivers, and in canyons of foothill oak woodlands and chaparral below 6,000 feet in elevation. It is found from southern British Columbia to the Baja Peninsula and is widespread throughout California, occurring on the west side of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada Mountains.

TOXIC FEATURE: All parts of poison oak plants contain an oil which can cause an irritating and sometimes severe dermatitis for many people who come in contact with the oil or its dried residue (even from bare stems or branches in winter). An itchy rash usually appears several hours after exposure. The extent of sensitivity or immunity for an individual can change over time. Often, the more an individual is exposed, the more sensitive he or she may become. The oil clings to and can be transferred from clothing, footwear, backpacks, etc., and pet fur. The oil can be extremely hazardous when released in smoke from burning poison oak.

PREVENTION: Learn what the poison oak looks like and avoid it. Clothing that completely covers arms and legs (long sleeved shirts and long pants) can reduce exposure. Leather gloves will reduce exposure to the hands. Boots and socks will reduce exposure to the feet and ankles. Clothing that has been exposed needs to be washed thoroughly after exposure. Avoid breathing the smoke from burning this plant.

TREATMENT: Immediate treatment can consist of repeated rinsing of the affected area with large quantities of water. Another treatment consists of thorough washing with soap and water within 2-8 hours of exposure to remove the oil. Washing with soap and water also removes skin oils that protect against the toxins. Exposure to poison oak for 3-6 hours after washing with soap and water may result in an increased reaction to the toxin. Topical applications of hydrocortisone may relieve the symptoms. Various specialized products are now available to help block contact or remove oil. Professional medical treatment is recommended for severe reactions.

STINGING NETTLE

Urtica dioica

DESCRIPTION: Stinging nettle is a perennial herbaceous plant that can grow from 2 to nearly 10 feet in height. Stems are 4-angled. Leaves are lanceolate to narrow-ovate, coarsely toothed, and opposite. Plants may appear “velvety” because of a covering of small, bristly, stinging hairs over much of the leaves and stems. Its flowers are small, greenish, and in loose to dense drooping clusters growing on slender branches in the axils of the upper leaves. This plant is dioecious meaning that the staminate (male) and pistillate (female) flowers usually occur on separate plants.



HABITAT and RANGE: Stinging nettle is found commonly along stream banks, on the edges of wet meadows, in shaded, moist waste places in a variety of plant communities, below 10,000 feet in elevation. Two species of stinging nettle are naturalized from Eurasia and are widely distributed throughout North America. Four other species (or subspecies) are native and are less widely distributed in California and the rest of North America.

TOXIC FEATURE: The small, hardened tips of many stinging nettle hair cells contain toxic fluid and break off easily on contact, penetrating the skin, and this results in reddening, itching, swelling, and a temporary but intense painful burning sensation. Some people can experience anaphylactic shock from the toxins. Dogs that have run through stinging nettle for any length of time have been observed to experience more severe reactions. The plant is a major nuisance to recreationists, ranchers, and land management specialists, because it produces impenetrable, unmanageable thickets along waterways and in other riparian areas.

PREVENTION: Learn what the stinging nettle looks like and avoid it. Clothing that completely covers the arms and legs (long sleeved shirts and long pants) can reduce exposure. Leather gloves will reduce exposure to the hands. Boots and socks will reduce exposure to the feet and ankles. Clothing that has been exposed can retain the stinging nettle hair cells and toxins. These can be removed by washing the clothing before wearing again.

TREATMENT: The best treatment for contact with stinging nettle consists of washing thoroughly with soap and water as soon as possible and lightly scraping the skin to remove the imbedded hair tips. Topical analgesic skin medications will relieve symptoms, while they last (usually a relatively short time.)

POODLE DOG BUSH

Turricula parryi also known as *Nama parryi*



Photo Credit
Alison Sheehy

DESCRIPTION: The Poodle Dog Bush is a strikingly beautiful plant with a tall cluster of many leafy shoots capped by a long stem of bright, colorful blue flowers. It is 3-6 feet high, with sticky, dense, hairy, ill smelling leaves. People unfamiliar with this plant have been known to gather the blossoms. It is similar in form to the herb Yerba Santa (*Eridicityon californicum*) and grows in the same areas.

HABITAT and RANGE: Poodle Dog Bush is found in dense concentrations following fires. It occurs in the southern half of California from Fresno to the Baja peninsula at elevations of 1000-7000 feet. It is most common in chaparral habitats just below the conifer zone. There are known populations on Greenhorn Mountain, in the Piute Mountains and near the towns of Kernville and Lake Isabella.

TOXIC FEATURES: Toxins in the plant cause a contact dermatitis similar to poison oak. It is uncertain but likely that the toxins are carried in smoke from burning this plant.

PREVENTION: Learn what the Poodle Dog Bush looks like and avoid it. Clothing that completely covers the arms and legs (long sleeved shirts, long pants) can reduce exposure. Leather gloves will reduce exposure to the hands. Boots and socks will reduce exposure to the feet and ankles. Clothing that has been exposed may retain some of the toxins. Washing clothing before wearing again may reduce your exposure. Avoid breathing the smoke from burning this plant.

TREATMENT: Treatments are similar to those for poison oak.



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