INDUSTRY WIDE LABOR-MANAGEMENT SAFETY COMMITTEE

SAFETY BULLETIN #27

POISONOUS PLANTS

This bulletin addresses safety considerations when working outdoors and exposed to poisonous plants. Although the types of poisonous plants may vary from region to region, basic safeguards should be taken to prevent serious injury or illness for anyone working where these plants grow.

General Information

Many plants are potentially harmful to humans when ingested or through skin contact with plant chemicals. These plants native to the United States, including poison oak, poison ivy, and poison sumac, normally grow along fence rows, waste areas, forests, stream banks, swamps, ponds and rocky canyons. While Poison sumac is generally associated with wetland environments.

Types Of Exposure

When in contact with skin, the sap oil (urushiol) of the aforementioned plants can cause an allergic reaction. Burning these poisonous plants produces smoke that, when inhaled, can cause severe lung irritation.

Workers may become exposed through:

- Direct contact with the plant.
- Indirect contact, such as touching tools, livestock, or clothing that have urushiol on them.
- Inhaling particles containing urushiol from burning plants.

Exposure to an amount of urushiol less than a grain of salt causes a rash in 80-90 percent of adults. Burning these poisonous plants can be dangerous because allergens can irritate lungs.

Identification

The saying “Leaves of three, let it be!” is a helpful reminder for identifying poison ivy and poison oak. However, it does not apply to poison sumac, which usually has clusters of 7–13 leaflets per leaf.

In some species, poison ivy and poison oak may also have more than three leaves per leaf. Their appearance may also vary depending upon the species, the local environment, and the season. There may also be common lookalike plants in the same

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areas.

Poison Ivy



(All photos courtesy of U.S. Department of Agriculture)

- Eastern poison ivy can grow as a climbing vine or shrub. Climbing vines may have hairy, ropelike stems. Each leaf typically has three leaflets, and foliage color and appearance may vary with the season. The leaves may be red during the fall season.

- Western poison ivy is typically a low shrub. Each leaf typically has three leaflets that do not form a climbing vine.

- Poison ivy may have yellow or green flowers and white to green-yellow or amber berries.

Poison Oak



- Poison oak is typically a shrub with three leaves, like poison ivy.

- Pacific poison oak may be vine-like.

- Poison oak typically grows as a shrub, although Pacific poison oak can also grow as a climbing vine. Each leaf usually has three leaflets, often with rounded edges and may have yellow or green flowers and clusters of green-yellow or white berries.

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Poison Sumac



- Poison sumac is a woody shrub that has stems with 7–13 leaves arranged in pairs.

- It may have glossy, pale yellow, or cream-colored berries.

Leafless or dead plants should not be assumed safe and that stems and roots can also present an exposure hazard.

Safety Precautions

Before work begins, assess the work areas and access routes for poisonous plants. Identify affected areas, communicate the hazards to cast and crew and establish routes or boundaries to avoid contact.

- If a plant cannot be confidently identified, avoid contact and notify your supervisor or Studio safety representative so the area can be properly assessed before work proceeds.

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after potential contact, removing gloves and before eating, drinking, smoking or touching bare skin/applying cosmetics.

- Wear long sleeves, long pants, boots, and gloves.
  - Remove contaminated clothing carefully to avoid transferring oil to skin. Keep it separate from clean clothing.
  - Wash exposed clothing separately in hot water with detergent. Arrange appropriate cleaning for costumes or other items that cannot be machine washed.
  - Depending on potential exposure, productions may need to supply personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g., disposable coveralls) for those employees.

- Use over-the-counter barrier skin creams, such as a lotion containing bentoquatam, which may offer some protection before contact. These barrier products do not replace avoidance, protective clothing or prompt washing after exposure.
  - Barrier creams should be washed off and reapplied twice a day, or as recommended by the manufacturer.

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- Clean exposed tools/equipment with rubbing alcohol (isopropanol or isopropyl alcohol) or soap and lots of water. Urushiol can remain active on the surface of objects for up to 5 years. Wear disposable gloves while cleaning.

- Do not burn plants that may be poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac. Inhaling smoke from burning plants can cause severe allergic respiratory problems.
  - When exposure to burning poisonous plants is unavoidable, production should provide employees with appropriate respiratory protection.

Symptoms

Symptoms may appear shortly after contact, but most symptoms appear **24 to 48 hours** following exposure.

Based on the three plants above, the most common symptoms may include:

- Red rash within a few days of skin contact
- Swelling
- Itching
- Possible bumps, patches, streaking, or weeping blisters
  - Blister fluids are not contagious. However, urushiol on skin, clothing, tools or other items can be transferred to another person or area of skin.

First Aid & Treatment

If you are exposed to a poisonous plant:

- Report exposure to the set medic. Medical treatment is most effective at the onset of exposure.

- Rinsing skin with rubbing alcohol, poison plant wash, or degreasing soap (such as dishwashing soap) or detergent, and lots of water is recommended.
  - Rinsing frequently so that wash solutions do not dry on the skin and further spread the urushiol is also recommended.

- For mild, localized rash, cool wet compresses, calamine lotion, caladryl or over the counter hydrocortisone cream can be applied to the skin and may reduce itching and blistering.
  - Follow the directions on any creams or lotions.
  - Do not apply creams or lotions to broken skin.
  - Oatmeal baths may relieve itching.

- An antihistamine such as diphenhydramine (like Benadryl) may be helpful to relieve itching.
  - Follow directions on the package.
  - Antihistamines may make you drowsy and impair alertness or coordination, follow all label warnings and do not drive, operate equipment, work at heights or perform other sensitive tasks.

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- Healed areas often remain hypersensitive to further contact for several months.

- Although extremely irritating, most cases disappear in a week to 10 days.

Emergency Response

- Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room if anyone:
  - Has a severe allergic reaction, like swelling or difficulty breathing.
  - Has had a severe reaction to poisonous plants in the past.

- In severe cases or if the rash is on the face or genitals, seek professional medical attention.

Further Assistance

If you have further questions, please contact your supervisor, Production Management, or the Studio Safety Representative.

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