

Finding the good in poison ivy

By Deborah Blum, Los Angeles Times

I still remember the moment in my childhood in which I lost all faith in the innocent purity of plants. One day, I was a carefree adolescent at summer camp, exploring the leafy woods with my fellow campers. A couple of days later, I was an illustration for a medical textbook. “The worst case of poison ivy I’ve ever seen!” the camp nurse told the other staffers as she trotted me and my dime-sized blisters around for inspection.



OK, I kind of enjoyed the attention. The slightly awestruck reaction. What 12-year-old girl wouldn't? But the itching, the oozing, the angry red swelling of feet and legs? Hated every minute. And since that summer, I've never entered forested land without conducting a slightly neurotic survey of the plant life furling about my feet.

It's a story that places me among the countless Americans – health officials estimate there are more than 350,000 new cases every year – who've tangled with poison ivy or its relatives, poison oak and poison sumac, and regretted it. I may, however, be one of the few ivy victims who have come to admire the enemy. In fact – have I spent too much time in the woods recently? – my purpose here as summer begins is to defend and even praise the fascinating, sometimes beautiful and environmentally essential poison ivy plant.

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