



Photo by J. Kline, UW-Stevens Point Freckmann Herbarium

Poison Ivy

What to watch for: Poison ivy is perhaps responsible for more itchy rashes than any other plant. In the western Upper Peninsula poison ivy occurs in a shrubby form. Poison ivy leaves occur in threes. The leaflets are shiny green and alternate on the stem. The plant has white berries in autumn.

Poison ivy plants contain an oil that can cause an allergic reaction in many people (including those who previously seemed immune). The rash does not occur immediately after touching the plant and may not show up for several days. Washing after exposure can remove some of the oil and is a good idea. The itchy rash and blisters can be treated with over the counter steroid creams and various other methods. Some people swear by very hot water to relieve the itch, others use the sap of jewelweed.

Where you'll find it: Poison ivy is common in rocky areas, wet woods and a variety of other areas.



Photo by K. Kohout, UW-Stevens Point Freckmann Herbarium

Wild Parsnip

What to watch for: Wild parsnip, along with other members of the parsley family, can cause a burn/rash that results when skin contacts sap and then sunlight. It has a yellow, flat umbrella-shaped flower head. Stems are tall, hollow, and ridged. Leaves have several lobes, and are alternate with their stems sheathing the main stem.

Skin exposed to the sap and then to sunlight can develop severe blisters and discoloration. Long-sleeved shirts and pants can prevent contact with sap. Washing after contact and avoiding sunlight can also help prevent the burn. Mild burns can be treated with cool, wet cloths; more severe burns may need steroid creams or other treatments.

Where you'll find it: Wild parsnip occurs in open areas such as roadsides, meadows, and stream banks. The plant is considered invasive and can form large patches.



Photo by J. Stiefel, UW-Stevens Point Freckmann Herbarium

Stinging Nettles, Wood Nettles

What to watch for: Walking through a patch of nettles is like being stung by many tiny bees. The sting is slightly delayed after contact, so that a hiker can be in the middle of a patch with no “nettle-free” exit before realizing what is happening. Nettles can be 2 to 3 feet tall and form large patches. Stinging nettles have opposite leaves, while wood nettles have alternate leaves. Nettle plants are covered in tiny, hollow, fragile hairs holding an irritant liquid which is injected into skin on contact that breaks the hairs.

This results in small white bumps on the skin and a burning/itching sensation which can last several hours. Most nettle rash does not need treatment, but washing with cool water or a paste of baking soda and water may help. The hairs can penetrate thin clothing, but thicker pants and shirts will prevent the sting.

Where you'll find it: Nettles occur in wetter, wooded areas such as floodplains, stream banks, swamps, ditches, shores and similar areas.

Other Plants to Watch for:

Thorns and prickles: Several shrubs and trees on the Ottawa have thorns or prickles which can tear the skin. Caution is suggested around raspberry, blackberry, and currant bushes; wild roses; thistles and hawthorns.

Other rash-raising plants: For some people this includes show lady's slipper, wild ginger, leatherwood, and hops.

Poisonous if ingested: Many plants on the Ottawa have poisonous fruits, bark, leaves, roots and other parts. Some are deadly, some just cause extremely unpleasant symptoms. *Never ingest wild plants unless you have a positive identification as an edible plant. Do not assume a plant is safe to eat because you see a bird or squirrel eat it.*

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