



An encounter with Toxicodendron radicans

Fun fact: A person can be immune to poison ivy for most of a lifetime, but that can change at any time. By “any time,” I mean two weeks ago.

Unlike so many other plants that make gardeners miserable, poison ivy is native to Connecticut. It has some positive attributes: the glossy leaves turn a handsome red in autumn, and the dark blue high-protein drupes, or berries, are an important food source for our birds. (Believe it or not, it’s been intentionally imported into other countries for the sake of its pretty foliage!) By definition, a native can never be invasive. But that was small comfort as I waited out the itch.

Armed (sorry) with hastily purchased elbow-length gauntlet gloves, I ventured out this morning to face one particularly aggressive plant that threatened to overrun my courtyard. The vine had planted itself in, among, and behind the stones of a retaining wall, almost as if it knew it would be impregnable there. The stones are far too heavy to move. Still, a too-hard tug could dislodge some of the less-stable ones. Long skinny runners in every direction yielded, until all that was left was a half-inch thick mother stem, bristling with rootlets and only visible if I leaned forward to peer into a cavity under an overhanging rock. Which I was not inclined to do, having seen snakes on those rocks on more than one occasion.

It was only thanks to the sturdy gloves that I mustered the courage to reach in to try to pull it free. No luck: it not only stayed put, it almost seemed to yank back. Perhaps I was in a tug-of-war with some cave creature? I re-imagine myself: I’m not a garden lady of a certain age, I am Beowulf, fearsome Viking warrior about to vanquish the cave beast Grendel. That famous saga, like all sagas, celebrates the hero’s gruesome and violent destruction of an enemy, which may or may not be human. One-and-a-half millennia later, John Gardner’s novel Grendel turned the story on its head, telling it from the troll’s point of view. In this version, Grendel just wants to go along to get along, sharing his cave with his monster mother (I can’t help thinking, much like a socially awkward gamer living in his parents’ basement). True, he ventures out for food, and true, that food generally comes in the form of dismembered Vikings. But he’s not to blame for that; he’s just doing what monsters evolved to do. And anyway he faithfully brings choice bits home to Mom. His penchant for killing humans is just one of those inconvenient (to us) evolutionary detours, like great white sharks and mosquitoes.

And poison ivy. We humans have a habit of seeing too many plants and animals as our enemies, without fully understanding the roles they play in the bigger picture. It would help if we could remember that they, like Grendel, are just some of nature's many innovative solutions to the problem of survival.

"Leaves of three, let it be" isn't as useful as one might think. It can be difficult to identify poison ivy, which is only one species, but has innumerable variations: leaves can be shiny or dull, two inches long or ten, climbing or shrublike. Surprisingly, only humans, and possibly a few other primates, get the rash. Other animals happily eat the leaves and berries, with no reaction at all, so the culprit chemical, urushiol, didn't evolve as a defense strategy. At least, not a defense against being eaten; some scientists speculate that it may be an antimicrobial agent, protecting the plant from infection. And we don't itch because the urushiol is burning our skin. We itch because it binds with proteins in our skin cells, causing our immune system to fail to recognize the cells as our own, and go on the attack. If you inhale its burning leaves (don't EVER burn poison ivy!), or are extraordinarily susceptible to the toxins, it can kill, but generally speaking it's far less lethal than some otherwise mild-mannered plants like strawberries and peanuts.

And so, trying not to blame poison ivy for just being itself, I go back to the courtyard and the lurking cave beast. No amount of tugging will dislodge the roots, so even though my clippers just manage to cut the thick stem, it's bound to grow back unless I scale up some chemical warfare of my own. I'm going to try a mix of dish soap, vinegar, and salt, or maybe some horticultural vinegar, which is more acidic than household vinegars, and hope it doesn't do too much damage to plants on the next lower tier. I'll just have to hope the long stems don't reach ungloved or unclothed skin, or flip up against my face. If they do, I'll be ready with brown soap, Calamine lotion, and anti-itch cream, but nowhere near enough patience. Still, a relatively small price to pay. Welcome, summer!