

Western Poison Oak

Toxicodendron diversilobum (Torr. & A. Grey) E. Greene

A lovely plant with variable forms. *It can grow as a low weak-stemmed herb-like shrub, as a woody shrub 0.5-4 meters tall, or as a vine up to 4 meters long that trails up and over other plants.* In wetter parts of the state, its stems reach up to 25 meters long; occasionally those individuals are treelike, growing alongside larger plants such as true oak trees and toyon. *Leaves shiny, hairless above, divided into 3 leaflets (rarely 5) that may be small or large, smooth-edged or lobed. Terminal leaflet 1-13 cm long; its petiole is long and slender, not winged with leaf blade tissue.* Leaves are typically bronze when first out of bud, turn green with maturity, and change to red, orange, or yellow before they drop off in fall. *Flowers unisexual, generally appear with or after the leaves break bud. Stamens 5 in male flowers, vestigial in female flowers (anthers, if present, are empty). Pistil 1 in female flowers, vestigial in male flowers. Styles 3 in female flowers, fused at base, with 3 terminal branches. Petals 5(4), creamy-yellow to greenish.* Fruit a spherical white berry, 1.5-6 mm wide. In flower (mostly) Mar-Apr.

One of the most hazardous plants in California, according to Dieter H. Wilken in *The Jepson Manual* (Baldwin et al. 2012), western poison oak grows abundantly throughout our area along the coast, coastal canyons, waterways, foothills, woodlands, and mountains. It occurs in all of our wilderness parks and along most forest trails.

The toxin within its sap, *urushiol* (pronounced oo-RU-she-all), is present year-round within and on the surface of the plant. When you contact the leaves or stems, it oozes onto your skin and can cause allergic contact dermatitis (ACD), an intense itching sensation accompanied by fluid-filled blisters. Scratching the rash only makes it worse by tearing open the blisters and may lead to secondary bacterial infection. It generally takes 1-2 (to 10) days after contact for ACD to appear, and it worsens and persists for 2-3 weeks. According to Crosby (2004), "Although the liquid in the blisters is harmless, contact with the affected area can spread surface allergen to other parts of the body." It can also be transferred by contaminated clothing, shoes, tools, and pet fur. Local biologists and naturalists report that Tecnu® products by Tec Labs and Zanafel® by Zanafel Laboratories can be used to wash affected skin and contaminated clothing.

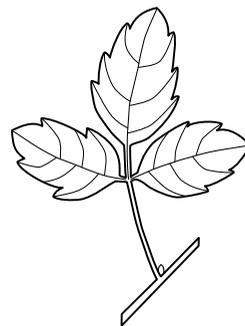
The extremely shiny lacquer that coats Japanese-made pottery and furniture is made from the sap of a related plant, the **Japanese lacquer tree** or **urushi** (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum* (Stokes) F. Barkley). The toxin urushiol was first isolated from the sap of this tree and named after it (Japanese, urushi = lacquer). Urushi lacquer can cause ACD when in liquid form but not after it dries and cures. Legend has it that people of Asian or Native American descent are less sensitive to urushiol than others. We do not know if this is true. The most prudent course of action, regardless of your ancestry, is to avoid touching this plant.

The genus was originally named by J.P. de Tournefort for its toxicity (Greek, toxicos = poison; dendron = tree) and formally published in 1735 by C. Linnaeus. The epithet was given in 1838 by J. Torrey and A. Gray for its lobed leaves (Latin, diversus = separated or turned; lobos = lobe).

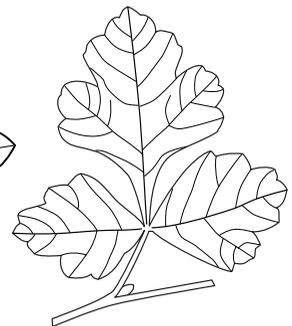
Similar. Skunkbrush (*Rhus aromatica*): in open sun among chaparral; a shrub with arching branches; *flowers appear before the leaves; leaves divided into three or more wavy- or square-edged leaflets.* Usually grows in dry areas near coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*, Fagaceae). **California blackberry** (*Rubus ursinus*, Rosaceae): in moist soil near shady watercourses; always a vine, never a shrub; sharp *prickles along stems, petioles, and leaf undersides*; leaves 3-lobed or pinnately divided into 3-5 lobes, most always pointed and toothed; *large white petals, 5-25 mm long*; fruit an egg-shaped aggregate of tiny fleshy berries, each dark red to black. Especially common near watercourses. **Virgin's-bowers** (*Clematis* spp., Ranunculaceae): in moist or dry soil; always a vine; *leaves opposite, 1-2 pinnate, leaflets often lobed and toothed*; petioles grasp and twine around other plants and objects; flowers much larger and obvious; fruit a cluster of dry seeds, each with a fuzzy tail.



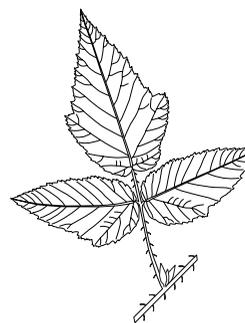
Lookalikes



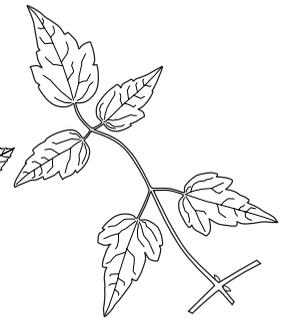
Western Poison Oak



Skunkbrush



California Blackberry



Virgin's-bowers