

# Poison Ivy

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The gardening incident was the weekend before, and was brief. I'd somehow forgotten that I wear my midseason biking gloves not just because they have those nice gripping dots and are just the right thickness to keep the rose bush from cutting me, but because of the time that I got a pretty significant rash weeding. That time, I'd evidently brushed against some poison ivy, versus this time, when I evidently grabbed an ivy vine and gave it my best yank. I mean, that's what you do when weeding, no?

The vine didn't get its revenge for a few days.

I learned something about my hand-washing technique. The blisters were initially entirely between my fingers, which tells me what I'd missed in my conscientious post-gardening hand-washing. From there, they got bigger and spread. I'm right-handed, so it makes sense that my right hand took the brunt of the poison. From between my fingers, it spread to the back of my hand. I suppose I handle my pillow pretty well, because I awoke one morning with the right side of my face red. After another night of that, I had to give up on my bed and sleep on the floor. Not sure why my right arm eventually got dry and red. Contact with my face (because I can't sleep unless I have a hand over my head)? Flow along the bloodstream from the epicenter between my right index and middle fingers?

When I have a skin ailment, I can think of no more wonderful experience than holding the affected area under near-scalding water. It's the catharsis and relief of scratching and scratching but without all that potentially damaging friction. To borrow a cliché, if this were an awards ceremony, holding a rash under near-scalding water would be a solid contender for "Best physical sensation (non-sexual)", and a nominee for the overall prize. A pal working in public health tells me that superhot water is actually good for you—dries out your vesicles—while a nurse pal laughed at the idea. I will be going with the opinion that says it's good for me.

Otherwise, the last week or so has just consisted of feeling itchy and unpleasant, and watching blisters slowly grow and placing mental bets with myself over when they'll give up. The blisters—stretched skin—have a wonderful texture to them. They don't burst in a satisfying and potentially painful and disturbing way, but eventually just start weeping a yellowish plasma that's just annoying and stains things.

So you don't want them to burst, but if they don't burst, then they start to get annoying anyway. Imagine somebody lightly pressing their pinky against the back of your hand, just a kilo of pressure, for two days, without pause. The one on the side of my index finger is making my index finger nauseous.



Figure 1: This time next week, this will be a normal hand. I'm told the word for these isn't *boil* but *vesicle*.

The webbing between middle and ring finger (both hands) hasn't been getting much sun. That joint doesn't stretch much on the best of days, and the skin has been loosened by all the vesicles, and the weeping little blisters have kept the webbing perpetually damp. To borrow my second cliché of the day: my perpetually dampened skin has what is typically described as Old Person Smell.

I spent most of Memorial Day weekend in the bathtub. Taking inspiration from the painting of Marat in the tub, I put a long flat cardboard box over the tub and did work on my laptop, until I decided that I would rather have my hands underwater. Water aside, any sort of manual labor began to feel repugnant. So from there, it was movies and TV off of a Netflix-on-demand login that somebody gave me.

[A review, in digression: I'm amazed that *Up*, a mainstream movie from Disney Corp, was so vehemently anti-zoo, characterizing them as a throwback and zoo supporters as basically evil.]

With my hands in this state, I've put off everything involving manual labor. I sleep in odd places because doing the laundry took too long (trying to not get pus on freshly-washed whites) and fully making the bed using the hands I have on hand seems daunting. I think I've lost weight, because even eating requires use of one's hands.

I have a desk job, so the next day I got to go to work. That is, I spent a full day in public, with a visibly marked face and hands that are repulsive to me—and I'm the guy who knows how they got that way. The day was spent trying to see how much I could do without putting my hands above table level, an exercise I recommend to you next time your office life gets a little dull. I found means of carrying papers without showing my hand. The presentation I gave—ten minutes but Q&A ran toward an hour—was done entirely without hand gestures; I wonder how off-putting that would've been to the listeners.

On the way home, the Metro was typically crowded, but when I stood to leave, people *parted*. It was kinda regal, in a 'you people think I'm hideous and contagious' sort of way. Of course, nobody was staring at me or such—quite the contrary, everybody

seemed to not notice me at all—yet they somehow knew who I was.

But I can take amusement at others' revulsion from me because I know I'm just a tourist to the condition. Contact dermatitis takes 10 to 14 days to clear up; given that I got a megadose of it, I'll certainly be on the high end of that or longer, but then I'll be done, and my face and hands will go back to being just kinda average.