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Extension Solutions for Homes and Gardens

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“Enjoying the Great Outdoors with Fewer Itchy Crawlies”

The southeast affords many opportunities to visit state and national parks within a day's drive from home. These parks offer a variety of outdoor recreational activities including fishing, hiking, camping, and mountain biking. However, if you've lived in the southeast for any length of time, then you *should* be familiar with the fact that we have a few local pests that can make your outdoor experiences miserable if you venture out unprepared. Having an enjoyable outdoor experience begins with knowing how to avoid the itchy crawlies.

Probably the top three most miserable pests in the southeast are poison ivy (and its relatives poison oak and sumac), ticks, and chiggers. Every year, county Extension offices receive numerous calls about these top three annoying pests. Usually, the client begins the conversation with “how do I get rid of these pests?” In reality, these pests are nothing new and have been here a lot longer than us humans. Getting rid of them is easier said than done. So, a better question might be “how do I learn to live with these itchy crawly pests?”

Knowing how to avoid these common pests is your best defense. All children should be taught at an early age what poison ivy looks like. The old saying, “Leaves of three? Let it be!” is a good rule to follow. Poison ivy comes in many different shapes and sizes and can always be found alongside even the best maintained park trails. Poison ivy can produce fuzzy vines as thick as Tarzan ropes on tree trunks, sometimes it's a seemingly innocent looking ground cover, and sometimes it hangs down from trees with branches producing compound leaves as big as your head. Your best defense is to know what to look for and avoid touching it at any cost. Since poison ivy commonly resides alongside trails, then wearing socks and close-toed shoes is the best way to protect your feet. Sandals and flip-flops, although comfortable, will not provide any protection. Long pants are recommended when walking along more rugged trails. And, because poison ivy can also climb trees, be aware of your surroundings and don't forget to look up and duck your head!

Ticks and chiggers are more commonly encountered when people venture off the beaten path. These insect-like arachnids prefer tall grassy and weedy areas. Ticks and chiggers are more likely to latch on to your legs and torso when brushing up against tall grass, weeds, and underbrush. Staying on manicured lawns and areas that are frequently mowed reduces your risk of exposure to ticks and chiggers. If you must go into weedy, unmaintained areas then your best defense is to wear long pants and apply a repellent containing the active ingredient deet or permethrin, which are available in many brands. Apply repellents to both clothing and exposed skin according to the product label. Check yourself for ticks at least twice a day. There is evidence that the longer an infected tick feeds, the greater the chance it has of transmitting a disease to you. Early removal is good prevention.

After returning from the great outdoors, launder field clothes in soapy, hot water (125°F.) for about half an hour. Properly washing clothes will remove chiggers, ticks, and oil residues from

poison ivy. Infested clothes should not be worn again until they are properly laundered and dried. As soon as possible, take a good bath or shower and soap repeatedly to remove chiggers and limit exposure to poison ivy. If you know you have been exposed to poison ivy, washing affected skin immediately can minimize your reaction to the oils. Remember, bathing is the most important step of your day, because the last thing you want to do is take these itchy crawlies to bed with you!

For more information, see UGA Extension Circular 937, “Protect Yourself from Ticks”; Circular 867, “Controlling Poison-Ivy in the Landscape”; and Circular 782, “Stinging & Biting Pests of People” at www.ugaextension.com or available through your local county Extension office.

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