



# THE NEXT STEP Toward a Healthier Future

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE SEBASTOPOL TOXICS EDUCATION PROGRAM

## Getting Your Land Ready for Winter

As the season turns towards fall, the days start becoming shorter and colder, and we see hints of the winter that soon will be here.

As you consider how you want to prepare for winter, I'd like to suggest some ways that you can avoid the use of toxics and create a healthy yard and garden for yourself and your family.

For instance, you can help your yard or garden by removing dead plant material, especially if any contains fungus, to prevent its spread.

You can also prune blackberries and ivy now. If you want to totally remove a section, cut it down to the ground, then put a teaspoon of vinegar on the stump to halt regrowth.

## Clearing Poison Oak

It's also a good time to cut back any poison oak on your property. That's because the plant's fairly dry now and heading into dormancy.

But be sure to do this safely! If most people touch any part of the plant, even roots or dead branches, its sap oil (urushiol) can cause swelling and blisters. So follow these steps:



**1) Learn how to identify poison oak.** It's useful to look for "leaves of three" that look like oak leaves. However, it can also be in other forms. Learn more at [www.poisonoakandpoisonivy.com/poisonivypoint.html](http://www.poisonoakandpoisonivy.com/poisonivypoint.html). (This is helpful information for anyone who works or plays outdoors.)

**2) Select the poison oak plants you want to remove.** Only focus on areas where humans or pets could be exposed. Poison oak isn't harmful to non-human animals, though pets can carry the oil into our homes. Plants can also provide wild animals with nourishment and help stabilize soil.

### 3) Choose your method.

**a) Mow, cut, and cover.** Cut the plants down, then put on a thick cover of carpet, cardboard, or tar paper layers, to prevent regrowth.

**b) Mow, cut, and till.** To be effective, you'll need to repeat this and/or plant replacement vegetation.

**c) Dig and pull out the roots.** This method works best when the soil is moist, helping you get all the roots. The long shallow root system can occupy a larger area than expected.

**d) Graze goats.** Be sure toxic pesticides haven't been used in that area, as they can harm the goats. There are other specifics, such as controlling animals with an electric fence, so talk with an expert or do some research before proceeding. (See over.)

**4) If you're doing one of the first three options, wear protective clothing.** One website advises long sleeves, long pants, boots, and thick gloves. Another recommends a painter's Tyvek suit, long rubber

## What Can Go in the Green Curbside Can?

■ **You can put these items in:** From the yard: Grass clippings, leaves, landscape prunings, berry vines, and tree trunks and branches up to 4 inches wide and 4 feet long. From the household: Most food items, including fruit, veggies, bread, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, and eggshells. Also allowed, *only* in the City of Sebastopol, are meat, fish, bones, and cheese (because of a pilot program here).

■ **Don't put these items in:** From the yard: Poison oak, palm fronds, pampas grass, bamboo, cactus, tree stumps, sod, dirt, rocks, or Sudden Oak Death infested material. From the household: Plastic bags (including "compostable" ones), cooking oil and liquid waste, animal waste, lumber, or other trash.

SOURCE: [www.recyclenow.org/compost/curbside.asp](http://www.recyclenow.org/compost/curbside.asp)

gloves, and plastic bags tied around shoes. Another suggests a dust mask if sawdust will be in the air. Goggles are also recommended. Decide what works for your sensitivity and project scale. Because of all this clothing, it's good to do this on a cooler day!

Note: It's great if you can have folks doing the work who have little or no sensitivity to poison oak; about 15 percent of the population doesn't.

**5) Properly dispose of any plants.** Here are four options:

- Bag and put them the trash.
- Cut them short and compact them at the original site, then cover with wood chips, to prevent sprouting and contact by people and pets.
- Bury them elsewhere on-site.
- Stack them in an untraveled area.

**6) Don't burn poison oak plants or put them in the green can or compost pile.** The oil can harm recycling workers, last for years in a home compost pile, and be carried in smoke that makes people quite ill.

**7) After working with poison oak, minimize what you touch**

## Managing Your Weeds

As the saying goes, a weed is just a plant where we don't want it. Here are some easy non-toxic ways you can manage those rogue plants!

### Applying Sheet Mulch

A quick way to suppress all the plants in an area (including bermuda grass) is sheet mulching. This also builds topsoil, feeds worms, and avoids tilling. Do it now to prepare your garden or property for spring.

- 1) If you have grass, cut it very low.
- 2) Remove any large debris, such as branches, to create a fairly flat surface.
- 3) Lay out cardboard, overlapping the sheets for full coverage.
- 4) Cover this with 3" to 4" of organic matter, such as compost or mulch.
- 5) Water well and keep moist.

After five or six months, the weeds will have been blocked, the cardboard decomposed, and the area made ready for you to plant!

### Hiring Goats

Some folks might want to explore using goats to cut down and manage weeds, including blackberry bushes. Goats can work on steep uneven surfaces, fertilize the ground, and are very cute! For more about this, see "Goats: Living Weed Eaters," from NCAP. [www.pesticide.org/solutions/](http://www.pesticide.org/solutions/)

[home-and-garden-toolbox/weed-solutions/goats](http://www.pesticide.org/solutions/home-and-garden-toolbox/weed-solutions/goats)

San Francisco Airport uses goats to clear brush for fire prevention. They employ the services of Goats R Us, from Orinda CA, which has about 4,000 goats on its payroll and also clears brush along freeways, in state parks, and under electric wires. <http://usat.ly/16d61cB>

### More Useful Approaches

You can read more of our articles about managing weeds via the STEP Index, at [www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html](http://www.healthyworld.org/STEPIndex.html). Look under "Weeds" and you'll find links to these five articles:

■ **Got Weeds?** (TNS I/3). You can manage weeds with mulch, such as leaves or wood chips. Or plant stronger plants, such as natives, to outcompete them.

■ **Nurturing a Truly Healthy Lawn** (TNS IV/3). A comprehensive look at both the common (and often hidden) toxics in lawn products, and the healthy nontoxic steps. Plus an information box on how you can use vinegar on some weed locations.

■ **Springtime with Permaculture** (TNS III/2). Offers a way to work from the larger permaculture view that many weeds are pioneer species, which actually help establish landscapes in disturbed soils.

■ **Oxalis Obliteration** (TNS IV/4). Gives specific tips for oxalis, a

"weed" with bright green clover-type leaves and low yellow flowers.

■ **Eating Your Weeds** (TNS II/4). Describes how common weeds can actually be nutritious and fun. Why not eat them instead?

Also, if you or others are considering an herbicide or "weed and feed" product (which usually contain hidden herbicides), the Index gives you access to these articles:

■ **What's the Matter with Roundup?** (under "Roundup")

■ **2,4-D Is Not 4 U** (see "2,4-D")

■ **Assessing Pesticides** (see "Pesticides, Assessing"). A systematic process, with steps, key definitions, and resources.

### Harmony Classes & More

Our local and well-respected Harmony Farm Supply is a good resource for identifying less-toxic products. They also have free ongoing classes. Coming up are "Rethink Your Lawn" (Sept. 28) and "Introduction To Rainwater Harvesting" (Oct. 5). Learn more and register on their website.

Harmony Farm Supply & Nursery. [www.harmonyfarm.com](http://www.harmonyfarm.com), 823-9125. Hwy 116, near Graton.

**The next Sebastopol Toxics Collection Day is on Tuesday Dec. 17, from 4 to 8pm.** To make an appointment, call (707) 795-2025 or (877) 747-1870 at least 24 hours before the event.

### Poison Oak, continued

**and wash everything to remove the oil.** Wash tools with soap and water or rubbing alcohol, wearing gloves. Wash clothes immediately and separately in hot water (or put them in a plastic bag for later washing). Take a shower right away, using either a strong regular soap, or a specialty "poison oak" soap. Washing quickly helps prevent a reaction. If you do get a rash, see [www.wikihow.com/Treat-Poison-Ivy-and-Poison-Oak](http://www.wikihow.com/Treat-Poison-Ivy-and-Poison-Oak).

**8) In a couple of weeks, and in the spring, check the area.** If you see any poison oak sprouts, pull them before roots get established.

**I invite you to let me know what techniques work for you,** including if you try vinegar on the roots.

**Note: These steps would be required even if you used toxic pesticides.** Because dead stalks retain the oil, you'd still need to remove the plants, wear protective clothing, and discard carefully. Also, multiple pesticide treatments are usually needed, and your land would then contain toxics that risk harm to people, animals, and other plants.

SOURCES: [www.pesticide.org/solutions/phase-2-solutions-for-consumers/poison-oak-and-ivy](http://www.pesticide.org/solutions/phase-2-solutions-for-consumers/poison-oak-and-ivy) • [www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants)

### ABOUT STEP

The Next STEP (TNS) is published six times a year by the **Sebastopol Toxics Education Program (STEP)**. STEP is a project of the **City of Sebastopol**, implemented by local citizen volunteers. STEP's mission is to support city residents in reducing their toxic use and exposure, creating a healthier and safer Sebastopol for everyone.

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