

# Powerful fragrance, dreadful reputation

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Of all the California native plants, poison oak, *Toxicodendron diversilobum*, is easily the most dreaded and feared. In fact the standard reference for California plants, The Jepson Manual (Hickman 93) states "one of the most hazardous plants in California".

Indeed, for those allergic to its oils - which is probably most people - it is a major deterrent to enjoying natural areas throughout most of the state. And there is no issue here with denying its often extreme effects - agonizing rashes and ceaseless itching which can incapacitate a person and even lead to serious medical complications.

Few people have much positive to say about this plant which can be nearly omnipresent in some areas. But not everyone is allergic to it, or only minimally so, and so it is easier for us to look at the plant perhaps more objectively.

It is an impressive plant in many regards, able to thrive in an enormous range of habitats and situations. It has many forms; groundcover, clinging vine, massive sprawling shrub colonies, or isolated free-standing shrub. It grows from sealevel into the lower mountains and from the coast to the edge of the deserts. It is tough, resprouting quickly from damaged stems and root fragments, and is hard to eradicate completely without repeated efforts.

It is well-known for its early "fall color", as it goes dormant as early as late June in some sites, to late fall in more favored habitats. It produces gorgeous coloration as it goes dormant, and this process can linger for months, creating a tapestry of yellow, peach, salmon, raspberry to rich glowing scarlet and red. Folks who detest the plant will see these colors and say to themselves, "Yikes look at all that horrid poison oak, it's everywhere!" Other, like myself, will say, "What a treat to have so much color so long in the summer landscape."

But a feature surprisingly few people associate with this plant is its intense sweet and spicy fragrance when in flower in the spring. It is perhaps, after *Ceanothus* (California "lilacs"), second to none in its fragrance, and a very lovely fragrance at that.

Why so few people know it as a fragrant plant is perhaps understandable, given most folks reluctance to be anywhere near it. Also, the flowers are quite small, though often produced in strings or branched clusters in great numbers. But one doesn't have to stick your nose into the plant to enjoy its scent, the scent carries freely on the air, often forming large plumes of spicy sweet scent that drifts throughout the landscape. Often while driving with the windows open, I will smell it first and then look around and notice a large mass of it dozens of yards away on a bank. Or while walking in the woods you may pass in and out of the fragrance repeatedly, each time thinking, "What a wonderful fragrance!" Most will glance around trying to figure out what is causing the fragrance, and will either be perplexed or attribute it to some showier plant in flower nearby.

The fragrance is closest - to my sense of smell - to carnations or dianthus (pinks), that wonderful combination of spice and sweet that most want to inhale deeply again and again. Trying to emphasize the positive, what a treat to have so much delightful fragrance given so freely by a plant that is so common and widespread. No need to toil over beds of carnation or cottage pinks with their short season, need for rich prepared soil, water and fertilizer, and weeding and dead-heading. Here we get all the fragrance and none of the work!!!

Another plus is the fragrant season is quite prolonged, especially in the canyons, where the sunny plants will flower weeks before those on shades slopes. And even when they are finished in your area, one only has to drive up to a higher elevation to enjoy the flowering season again, and again. Follow up note: after posting this, a few folks have told me that they can absolutely not detect a fragrance from this plant. While I find it hard to believe, given the intense fragrance I get from this plant, it is the nature of fragrances to be of variable perception among various people.



Tiny 5 petaled flowers don't look like much but pump out the fragrance