

Sumac – *Rhus copallinum*, *R. glabra*, *R. typhina*

Sumac Family – Anacardiaceae

Description & Habitat:

Sumac is a deciduous shrub that grows on the sides of roads, interstates, fields, anyplace where there is an opening of light or disturbed soil. It sends out horizontal underground stems that sprout and form colonies. Although it is a native, it can sometimes be invasive, especially in a yard or garden.

Sumacs can be divided into two groups: poison sumac and non-poison sumac. The poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) has white berries that hang in loose clusters while the non-poison sumac (*Rhus* spp.) has red, tightly clustered berries. The poison sumac, which fortunately is a lot less common than the others, can cause a contact dermatitis reaction, similar to poison ivy, in some people. Large, compound leaves that turn flaming red in the fall, are characteristic of both groups.



Smooth Sumac (*Rhus glabra*)



Winged Sumac (*Rhus copallinum*)

Botanical Uses

All species that bear red fruits can be used to make a tart, lemonade-like beverage. Fruits are covered with bright red hairs that are tart with malic acid. They also contain ascorbic acid (vitamin C) and tannic acid. They can be dried and ground into a reddish powder by placing them in a blender or coffee grinder. Strain out the seed and keep the powder. The dried berries are a traditional Middle Eastern seasoning used primarily on chicken and fish. The powder can also be used to add a tart flavor to any recipe.

The secret to a good tasting sumac drink, or sumac ade as some call it, is in the fruit. Quality fruits produce quality results. With sumac, it's watching for the right moment, when the fruits turn glowing, bright red, ideally, before a rain. After a few days, they will lose that glow and start dulling in color. Breaking open a cluster will reveal hundreds of tiny insect eggs around the stems, maybe even a few caterpillars. It's best to get the fruits before they reach this stage. When ripe, the end branches snap off easily.

Sumac ade can be made by infusing the berries in either hot or cold water. A cold water infusion has a fruitier taste but has to steep for a longer period of time. It has a lemonade-like flavor and is a refreshing drink to have on a hot, summer afternoon. The juice can also be used to make jelly, pies or as a substitute for lemon juice.

Traditional Uses

Sumac was known and used by the American Indians before the settlers arrived. Roots, bark, leaves and berries were all used by various tribes for a multitude of purposes. Berries were soaked in water to make a beverage, and the dried berries were ground into flour for a mush or to add to soup. Among the Delaware, sumac was mixed with tobacco and smoked. The Iroquois peeled the young shoots and ate them raw. Among the Potawatomi, the leaves were steeped to make a tea that was used as a gargle for sore throats. Berries were also used by other tribes to make a tea for sore throats and colds (Erichsen-Brown, 1979).

Sumac is also a source for dyes. Black, brown, green and yellow can be obtained from the roots, leaves, bark and berries. Ink was made from the bark and berries.

Wildlife Uses

The fruits of sumac remain on the plants well into the winter, offering a source of food for wildlife when other foods are scarce. Several gamebirds rely on sumac as a winter food source as do some of the songbirds which winter in the north. Dense thickets provide cover for small mammals, deer, and birds. Deer and rabbits browse on the bark and twigs.

References

- Erichsen-Brown, C. (1979). *Medicinal and other uses of North American plants*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Foster, S. and Duke, J. A. (2000). *Medicinal plants and herbs of eastern and central North America*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Martin, A. m Zim, H. S., Nelson, A. L. (1951). *American wildlife & plants: A guide to wildlife food habits*. New York, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.



Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)