

Pause for Plants ... Sumacs and their Kin

Easy to find in our region are at least two sumacs, Winged Sumac, *Rhus copallinum*, and Smooth Sumac, *Rhus glabra*. These native shrubs or tree-sized plants have wide ranges. Smooth Sumac ranges throughout the United States and Canada, and Winged Sumac grows in our eastern states, in eastern Canada, and west as far Texas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska. Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*) has a similar range, but is not very common in South Carolina. Another native Sumac of the same genus, Fragrant Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*), also grows in South Carolina and has an uncanny resemblance to Poison Ivy! I'll be "pausing" mainly for Smooth and Winged Sumacs, that are easy to spot in our area now with flowers and fruit. And I'll also include a few of their "kin".



© USC Herbarium Photo by Linda Lee

Figure 1

Sumacs belong to the cashew family, Anacardiaceae, an interesting plant family which also includes pistachios and mangos. But there are the infamous members of the family such as Poison Ivy, Poison Oak, and Poison Sumac, species which produce urushiol, the chemical responsible for irritating rashes and dermatitis. Poison Ivy and Poison Oak grow often as vines, whereas Poison Sumac grows as a shrub. Poison Sumac prefers moist, even swampy, habitats, and would seldom be found growing in dry, very sunny locations that are preferred by safe nontoxic Winged, Smooth, and Staghorn Sumacs. Poison Sumac does have similar compound leaves, but its fruits are white and in loose clusters. Image at:

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=TOVE> As a rule, sumacs with mature red fruit are non-toxic.

The toxic species used to be included in the genus *Rhus*, but are now classified in

the genus *Toxicodendron*. (Toxico = poison, dendron = tree)

In our region folks often confuse Poison Ivy and Poison Oak, whose compound leaves have three leaflets, with Virginia Creeper, from the grape vine family, Vitaceae, most of whose compound leaves have five leaflets. Virginia Creeper's berries are toxic to humans, but not to birds who relish them. Some folks could have skin irritation caused by oxalates in SAP of Virginia Creeper, but not from casual touch. Virginia creeper belongs to the grape vine family, Vitaceae. It is an attractive native vine and ground cover for the garden.

Figure 1: Poison Ivy

Figure 2: Poison Oak

Figure 3: Virginia Creeper, "creeping" over our Pressly Garden shed.



© USC Herbarium Photo by Linda Lee

Figure 2

Now, back to the Sumacs. Smooth and Winged Sumacs are usually abundant along roadsides, and their leaves will be making brilliant red autumn displays. Leaves are long and pinnately compound resembling leaves of Black Walnut trees. Smooth Sumac leaves and leaflets are longer than those of Winged Sumac, and only the latter has "wings," which are narrow leaf like flat extensions, along their leaf stalk (rachis). Winged Sumac is also known as Shining Sumac because the upper surface of their leaves are shiny. Botanists call such leaf surfaces lucid or lustrous!

Figure 4: Bright Red autumn leaves of Winged Sumac along Moffatt Parking lot, Fall 2011.

Winged Sumac blooms and sets fruit during late summer, so that's what it's doing in the Upstate now. Blooms are creamy white in dense clusters (panicles) at the ends of branches.

Fruits of Smooth and Winged Sumacs are small and botanically called "drupes." A drupe is a fleshy one stony seeded fruit with a thin skin or rind. Peaches and olives are examples of larger drupes! Sumac fruits are deep red for Smooth Sumac, and a duller red for Winged Sumac, and they persist at the tips of branches on into spring. Winged Sumac fruit clusters tend to droop down. Smooth Sumac fruits form tighter clusters that remain upright on leafless stems through the winter and beyond. Birds relish fruits of both species, and effectively spread the plants about.

Smooth Sumac blooms earlier and its fruits are pretty much mature by now.



Figure 3

Figure 5: Winged Sumac with blossoms.

Figure 6: Winged Sumac blossoms close up.

Figure 7: Smooth Sumac with fruit.

Fruits of both of these Sumacs can be used for a refreshing lemonade-like drink, jellies and other healthful recipes. The short surface hairs of the fruits contain malic acid and ascorbic acid (Vitamin C). Just touch your tongue to a cluster to taste it! You have to remember that Sumacs are related to cashews,

pistachios and mangos, so folks allergic to any of these should avoid using sumac for a wild edible. Smooth sumac is one of the wild edibles featured with recipes in Plantworks by Karen Shanberg and Stan Tekiel. A number of sumac recipes can easily be found on line. Recipes that feature Staghorn Sumac work fine for Smooth Sumac. This link tells of a Sicilian culinary sumac, and information about and instructions for making sumac "lemonade."

<http://cuherbsociety.org/hotm/sumac.htm>



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7