

## Spicy Sumacs

I continue to be intrigued by the debate over Native Plants. Without question, they are important for providing food and habitat for various animals and insects, and many provide attractive additions to the garden. In spite of their many benefits, numerous gardeners still deem natives as unattractive or weedy. Sumac is a fine example. In high school, I too thought it was merely a roadside weed. However, as I studied plants, I came to understand the beauty of this plant and the advantages of its tough constitution when properly sited in the landscape. Unfortunately, it is amazing how many people still malign Sumac as not only weedy, but poisonous! Both are not true, and hopefully we can begin to dispel this ill reputation!

Found in the Anacardiaceae or cashew family, the common name of Sumac is from the ancient Aramaic word of *Summaq*, meaning dark red. It is in reference to the dark red spice that is made from the fruits of *Rhus coriaria*, a southern European Sumac that is popular in Greek and Middle Eastern cuisine. It imparts a lemon-like taste and is used as a rub for meats or as a light garnish on salads. Common names are often easier to remember, but I prefer botanical names since they severely reduce the confusion that often occurs with common names. Poison Sumac, *Toxicodendron radicans*, was once lumped in the genus *Rhus*, but was shifted to this new genus, along with Poison Ivy and Poison Oak. Plants in this genus contain oils of urushiol, a chemical that creates severe dermatological rashes. In fact, Poison Sumac often results in rashes far more severe than Poison Ivy or Oak, and the 35 species of *Rhus* are now the recipients of this unfounded reputation for being poisonous! The genus name of *Rhus* was authored in 1753 by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) and is derived from the Greek word *Reo*, which means stream or flow or *Rhu*, meaning flux. One of the important medicinal uses of Sumac was to reduce the hemorrhaging of blood or any fluid for that matter, from the body. Linnaeus's understanding of the use of plants and the Greek language was impressive, although, as we shall see, he was not without fault!

Of the 35 species of Sumac, the Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*) and the Aromatic Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) are two of my favorite native Sumacs for the garden! The Staghorn Sumac gets its name from the velvet-like pubescence that appears on the current year's growth (pictured at right). The species epithet refers to its similarity in appearance of the current year's growth to the fuzzy female flowers of Cattail, which is botanically known as *Typha*! Interestingly, this plant had two botanical names well into the 1900's! In 1753, Linnaeus originally named this plant *Datisca hirta* and in 1756, he mistakenly thought a sample to be an entirely different plant and renamed it *Rhus typhina*. In



1892, the American botanist and chief dendrologist for the US Forest service, George Bishop

Sudworth (1864-1927) noted that the names referenced the same plant and renamed the plant *Rhus hirta* with *Rhus typhina* as a synonym. Unfortunately, the synonym name was too well accepted and remained the name of choice, although occasionally one will see *R. hirta* used in the literature. Staghorn Sumac can reach arborescent heights of 15+ feet and like many other sumacs, it likes to colonize. It is this tendency to spread that also gives this genus a weedy reputation. The leaves are compound, possessing a central rachis or 'stem' with an attractive red blush at its base (see image on the right) and upwards of 27 leaflets arranged along the rachis. The entire leaf, which includes the rachis and leaflets, are typically 1-2' in length and provide the plant with a lacy, tropical



appearance. Fall color is a beautiful bevy of yellows, oranges and scarlets while the winter outline is attractively coarse and open (see below at right). In June through early July, the flowers appear in 2-4' long panicles (pictured at right).



The plants are dioecious, meaning that some plants only bear female flowers, while others only male. Those with female flowers give rise to fruits that are individually just over 1/8" in diameter and very hairy. The fruits are gathered into dense, ornamental cones that reach 6-8" in length and ripen to bright red come August (pictured at left). These cones remain ornamental throughout most of the winter with the seeds providing food for a number of bird species.

The plants thrive in hot, dry, sunny locations and extend as far north as Eastern Quebec and Minnesota. The cultivar 'Laciniata' was first described as a variety by the American botanist and theologian Alphonso Wood (1810-1881). It has far more deeply cut leaflets, further enhancing the lacy appearance and it bears female flowers. Unlike a true variety, the delicate leaves of 'Laciniata' are not reproduced from seed and it needs to be propagated by asexual means. *Rhus typhina* Tiger Eyes™ is a recent introduction with attractive dissected foliage that is chartreuse in color!



*Rhus aromatica* or Fragrant Sumac thrives in similar hot, dry locations, but bears an entirely different appearance. The plant was once again named by Linnaeus. The stems emit a fragrant



aroma when crushed, giving rise to the species epithet. The leaves consist of three glossy leaflets and although it lacks the tropical appearance of its cousin, the foliage serves as a larval food source for the Banded Hairstreak butterfly (*Satyrium calanus*). Similar to *Rhus typhina*, it also tends to sucker and spread, but it develops a mounded habit that reaches a more subdued height from 3-8'. The plants are mostly dioecious, with both male and female yellow flowers gracing the bare stems in April or early May. The fall color is an attractive red to reddish purple and the winter habit is delicate and twiggy with small clusters of red berries developing on the female plants that are also favored by birds. The cultivar named 'Gro-low' has proven to be a wonderful addition to a Gardeners tool bag (pictured above)! It only reaches 2' tall by 6' wide and has a less dense, more open appearance than the straight species. It performs admirably at keeping weeds at bay and has spectacular red fall color (pictured above left). I have enjoyed pairing this plant with any of the *Amsonia* cultivars; it grows to roughly the same height and its yellow spring flowers look great when paired with the blue flowers of *Amsonia* (picture at right). In addition, the yellow fall color of the *Amsonia* nicely compliments that of the Sumac come late October and November! It makes an ideal plant for decorating dry, sunny slopes and has also proven to be rather deer resistant.



The much maligned Sumac not only has an interesting story to share with the roots of its name, but it provides wonderful seasonal interest and is greatly appreciated by our wildlife. Granted, it is a plant which can spread and will need to be controlled where that proves to be problematic. However, a poisonous weed it certainly is not! With the diversity of foliar colors and textures

(exemplified by *Rhus typhina* Tiger Eyes™ pictured at right), the flowers and the ever-changing textures of the plant throughout the seasons, Sumacs provide a breadth of visual interest that endures throughout the year. In addition, their stout constitution allows them to accept baking sun and drought, making them ideal candidates for situations where many other plants would fail. Indeed, Sumacs provide the needed ‘Spice’ for the Garden as well as for the dinner table!

