



Is Sumac Landscape Worthy?

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Driving down the road one is met with a spectacular sight of crimson red, conical-shaped fruits extending from various treetops in a sea of green. This is a telltale sign that you've just seen one of the three most popular sumac tree species. The fiery red berry clusters, called drupes, are observed on staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*), smooth sumac (*R. glabra*), and the flameleaf or shining sumac (*R. copallina*).



Staghorn sumac drupe. Photo by Heather Zevetchin, 2021

These trees are perceived as an invasive, a nuisance that pops up unwanted, sprouting in gardens, pavement cracks, vacant lots, and along highways. Sumac is a member of the cashew family with

150 species worldwide and dozens of species native to the United States. These small trees are outstanding at controlling erosion, tolerating road salts, flourishing in all types of soil conditions from clay to gravel, and able to withstand a wide range of soil moisture conditions. Their ability to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere helps them thrive in polluted city air.

Staghorn sumac gets its name from the soft fuzzy hairs adorning the stems that resemble young deer antlers. The berries are also fuzzy. A staghorn sumac in Montana made the National Register of Champion Trees in 2016. Yellow, orange, and scarlet leaf colors are seen in fall.

The stems of smooth sumac, as the name implies, are hairless. This sumac usually grows in colonies developing in all directions from the mother plant. They are often found along roadsides and other low maintenance areas. This dwarf variety is slowly gaining popularity in planned landscapes.

The flamel leaf or shining sumac is compact and dense when young. As it ages, the beauty of its architectural shape begins to show. Branches become crooked and irregular and spread out as they age. The tree can reach a height of 20 to 30 feet. The rich green leaves seen in summer give way to burgundy to maroon in the fall, hence its name.

All three sumacs mentioned above have compound leaves. Compound leaves consist of numerous leaflets, all attached by a short stem to a main stem. Sumac leaves grow 12 to 24 inches long, giving them a tropical appearance. The leaves are an important food source for many caterpillars, including the saddled prominent, spotted datana, luna moth and the hickory horned devil, which is in decline in the Northeast. Sumacs are dioecious, meaning that a plant is either male or female; only females produce berries. The berries are not the first choice for wildlife but are a vital winter survival food source for many birds including evening grosbeaks.

Unfortunately, when we hear the word sumac, most of us tend to cringe immediately thinking of its relative, poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*). First and most important, poison sumac exclusively inhabits shaded bogs, swamps, and wetlands. It is highly unlikely the urban or even rural homeowner will have this plant growing in their yard. Those who work or explore a bit deeper into nature near swamps or bogs are the only people likely to come into contact with poison sumac. The berries are noticeably different, aiding in the identification. Unlike the sumac mentioned above that have tightly red bunched, erect fruits, poison sumac berries are loose, creamy white and hang from the tree.

The Native Americans and those in the Middle East have a long history of using this tree. Native Americans used sumac for medicinal benefits. The dried fruit of the sumac is a household staple in the Middle East, much like we use salt or pepper here in the United States. Because of the popularity of its tart lemony flavor, sumac-based products can often be found in the spice aisle of local grocery stores. Because sumac is in the cashew family, caution is advised for those with a nut allergy.

Despite the many beneficial characteristics, sumacs are not for everyone. The spreading habits and architectural look may be too daring for some. But if you're looking for a bold native tree

that makes a statement and you have room for it to roam, sumac may just be landscape worthy plant you are looking for.



Staghorn sumac clump. Photo by Heather Zevetchin, 2021

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