Roadside F

Story By Kathy Andrews

Even before the forest canopy is painted with rich autumn jewel tones, roadsides, woodland edges and old fields present a fiery salute to the dog days of summer.

Sumacs are renowned for feathery, lemon-scented leaves that turn scarlet in autumn and stout twigs capped with a torch of red berries. These flaming clusters can't escape notice as we cruise country backroads on annual migrations to the apple orchard, pumpkin patch or fall festival.

A woody plant found throughout temperate and tropic zones, sumacs, and their tasty tropical cousins mangos and pistachios, belong to the cashew family. One Illinois species, poison

(Photo courtesy John Dudak.)

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sumac, shares a nasty trait with the cashew. Dubbed the “blister nut” by soldiers returning from World War II, cashew nuts can be harvested without risk of skin irritation only after the apples are burned and the oils released. That same oil is responsible for an annoying skin irritation some people experience after brushing against a poison sumac plant.

(Photo courtesy Erin Keller, www.bcprods.com.)

The tallest sumac species growing in Illinois, staghorn sumac (*Rhus hirta*), can reach heights up to 40 feet and have a trunk up to 15 inches in diameter. Leaves are alternate, compound and up to 2 feet long. Young branches are covered in dense brown hairs, reminiscent of the velvet on antlers, hence the common name. Staghorn sumac is found in scattered locations in forests and thickets around Illinois.

Know this plant—from a distance. Poison sumac has untoothed leaves while the other Prairie State sumacs have toothed leaves. Another difference is the fruits: drooping, white clusters on the species to avoid and upright, red clusters on the non-poisonous varieties.

If not for their brilliant fall colors, sumacs would be unfairly overlooked much of the year. As a group, sumacs have surprisingly diverse historical uses that continue in some cultures today, and they’re also an important wildlife food source.

Historically, leaves and bark were used to make ink, to dye fabrics various shades of brown and to tan leathers that were highly prized, flexible, lightweight and light in color. High in tannin, sumac teas and poultices were used as astringents, antiseptics and tonics to treat sore throats and other ailments. Cleaning out the large, pithy centers of smooth and staghorn sumac, early settlers crafted spiles for harvesting maple sap—and peashooters and popguns for children.

Historically, seeds harvested in late summer and early autumn were used to infuse a tart, lemony flavoring in meats, and today the berries of some sumac species remain a highly prized spice, particularly in the Mediterranean.

An absence of hairs on branches makes for easy identification of the smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*). A small tree, reaching heights of 20 feet and trunk diameters up to 8 inches, leaves are alternate and pinnately compound. Smooth sumac is found throughout Illinois in forests, fields and disturbed areas.

(Photo courtesy Kenneth R. Robertson, Illinois Natural History Survey.)

(Photo courtesy Stacy L. Iwanicki.)

(Photo courtesy James H. Miller, www.plants.usda.gov.)

Poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*, formerly *Rhus vernix*) differs from other members of the sumac group by the absence of teeth on the edges of the leaves, lack of a winged stalk between leaflets and presence of drooping, white or cream-colored berries. Brushing against a plant may release the poisonous sap and cause a rash similar to poison ivy. A plant of bogs and swampy forests, poison sumac is found in northeastern Illinois and Coles and Woodford counties.

Close examination of a sumac reveals a host of bees, wasps, flies and caterpillars feeding on the plant. White-tailed deer browse on leaves and branches, and rabbits feed on the bark. Sumac berries persist on the plant for a considerable time, and the presence of berries throughout winter indicates preferred foods for gamebirds and songbirds were abundant and this emergency food source was not needed.

As days shorten, the striking scarlets fade and fall to the ground, leaving only artistic, angular branches and fire-red seed heads. These torches mark where the show will return next year, and remind us that these pioneer shrubs are more than just show.

A short shrub of woodlands, bluffs and sand dunes, fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) shares the leaflets-of-three characteristic with its cousin, poison ivy, but the leaves are hairy and fragrant when crushed. This sumac is classified as occurring occasionally throughout Illinois.

For a tart, refreshing beverage, often called “Indian lemonade” or “Rhusade,” crush ripe smooth or staghorn sumac berries gently between your hands, soak them in cool water for a short period of time then strain the liquid through a cloth and add sugar to taste. A concentrated solution is often used as a substitute for lemon juice.

Shining sumac (*Rhus copallina*) is often called dwarf or winged sumac. Growing up to 35 feet tall with a 6-inch diameter trunk, the key character to identifying this species is the presence of winged stalks on the leaflets. Growing on dry hills and fields, shining sumac is found primarily in the southern third and northeastern corner of Illinois.

(Photo courtesy Stefan Bloodworth.)