

## CHAPTER TEN

### STAGHORN SUMAC:

#### “RHUS” JUICE, ANYONE?

Mention the name “Sumac” and many people immediately think of the dreaded Poison Sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*), which reputedly causes even worse skin irritation and blistering than its close relative, Poison Ivy (*Toxicodendron radicans*). Most Sumac species are perfectly harmless — and tasty besides — and are easily distinguishable from Poison Sumac. Poison Sumac has loose, drooping clusters of greenish-white berries that closely resemble those of Poison Ivy, while all other species of Sumac native to Essex County (Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*), Smooth Sumac (*Rhus glabra*) and Winged Sumac (*Rhus copallinum*)) bear tight, upright clusters of red berries. Furthermore, Poison Sumac is relatively uncommon and isn’t usually found outside of swamps, whereas the other Sumac species prefer open, drier ground.

The most commonly encountered Sumac in Essex County, Staghorn Sumac is a large shrub (10 to 12 feet tall) which bears compound leaves with 11-31 pointed toothy leaflets 2-4" long (in contrast, Poison Sumac’s toothless leaflets are more egg-shaped and only about an inch or two long). The “staghorn” appellation refers to the fuzzy appearance and feel of the twigs, which is similar to the velvety covering on young deer antlers. Although it is a native species that was once used extensively by Native Americans, Staghorn Sumac goes unappreciated by many as it tends to grow in neglected and highly disturbed landscapes such as abandoned buildings, old fields and vacant lots. To unbiased eyes, however, it is quite attractive, especially in the fall when its leaves turn bright scarlet. Europeans must agree, since they have imported Staghorn Sumac to grow as an ornamental shrub.

The name “Sumac” is derived from the Arabic word for red. The crushed fruits of a Sumac native to the Middle East, *Rhus coriaria*, are used extensively in the cuisine of that region. The barks of several Sumacs have been used as a source of tannic acid for curing leather, which explains why the name “Sumac” has been corrupted to “Shoemake” in some localities. All of the aforementioned plants in the *Rhus* genus, along with mango and cashew, are members of the Anacardiaceae or Cashew Family. That helps to explain why some people eat raw cashews to try to develop an immunity to Poison Ivy, and why some people get dermatitis from handling raw mangoes.

The most well-known edible portion of Staghorn and all the other edible Sumac species is an acid coating on the outside of the berries consisting of malic acid (the substance that makes apples tart), ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) and tannic acid (one

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of the flavoring ingredients in tea). Sumacs have both male and female flowers (borne on the same or separate plants), but you will only find berries on the female ones. Staghorn Sumac’s yellow-green female flowers bloom in early-to-mid summer, and are followed about a month later by fuzzy red berries in tight, upright, clusters ranging from 3-8 inches in length.

The berries are typically at their best in the latter half of August, but you should be able to locate some flavorful berry clusters weeks or perhaps even months later. Just don't harvest Sumac berries after a big rainstorm, as the rain will wash the acid off (it usually comes back a few days later, although eventually it will wash off for good). To determine whether the berries are ready to be harvested, follow this simple test: lick your index finger, jam it into the center of a berry cluster, wiggle it around a bit and lick your finger again. If you get a strong, pleasing, tart flavor, the berries are good to use. All of the other berry clusters on that same Sumac bush are likely to be at or near the same degree of ripeness.

To harvest, just snap the berry clusters off their weak stems. An excellent use for Sumac berries is to make "Sumacade"—some people call this "Indian Lemonade" or "Rhus juice" (after its botanical name). Place the berries into a water-filled container (cold or room-temperature water is best, as very hot water tends to leach too much bitter tannic acid from the berry clusters and ruin the flavor). You will need a dozen or so berry clusters to flavor about a gallon of water. Use your hands to knead and break the berry clusters apart in the water (this gets the flavor off the hairs on the berries and into the water). Then use your hands again to remove the spent berries, squeezing them briefly to release any flavored liquid into the container. Pour the remaining liquid through a sieve lined with a cloth or paper towel to remove any residual berries or other material. The whole process takes less than 30 minutes. The liquid will be quite tart, pinkish-orange in color, and could easily pass for unsweetened Pink Lemonade. The tradition of making and drinking Sumacade goes back at least to Colonial times; in fact, it is rumored that Pink Lemonade was invented to mimic the pink color of Sumacade, which people were accustomed to drinking before Lemonade became widely available. Sweeten to taste and serve as a hot or cold beverage. This liquid can also be used as an ingredient in jelly or jam, especially that made with low-acid fruit like Elderberries (see Part Four), which ripen at about the same time. Simply simmer the fruit in Sumacade instead of water, and then proceed with your recipe. Ripe Sumac berry clusters can also be dried for later use.

As Sumacade requires no cooking or fancy preparation equipment, it is one of the easiest wild drinks to make on a camping trip or other outing. I was able to demonstrate this a few years ago while canoeing with some colleagues along the Merrimack River in New Hampshire. I had agreed to stay behind with the boats at

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Harvested Staghorn Sumac berry clusters.

the "put-in" point in Franklin while the others shuttled some vehicles to our "takeout" point in Concord. While waiting and looking for something to occupy my time, I noticed a clump of Sumac bushes a short distance away. I gathered a bucketful of ripe fruit clusters, smooshed the clusters in some water, strained it with a clean T-shirt I happened to have on hand, and had the Sumacade ready by the time the others returned.

Fellow forager Sam Thayer from northern Wisconsin (see Bibliography) offers another way to eat Sumac. In mid-spring, the tender new green stems at the

growing tips of Sumac branches can be peeled and eaten. The peeled raw stalks are delightfully crisp, juicy and tart, and are great for snacking on the spot or added to a salad. You will have the best luck finding these young stems on the edge of a field or roadside where young plants are resprouting vigorously after having been mowed down. Feel your way down the new stem until it gets stiff and snap it off, peel and eat. (A bit of milky sap may come off as you do this, but it won't affect the flavor.) One last note of interest: Sumac twigs can be used for tapping Maples and other trees for sap if you run out of metal spiles. Find a section of stem that is about 1/2" in diameter and cut into 3 1/2" lengths. Poke the soft orange pith out of the center of each stem section using a length of metal coat hanger. Then gently tap this hollowed-out stem into the hole you drilled in the tree. You can even cut a small notch at the end of the stem to help hang your sap bucket.

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*Ripe Staghorn Sumac berry clusters, ready to be made into Sumacade*



More info on Russ' wild edibles walks/talks, recipes, book/articles, etc.:

<http://users.rcn.com/eatwild/sched.htm>

Russ can be reached at [eatwild@rcn.com](mailto:eatwild@rcn.com)

Russ' foraging book, *Wild Plants I Have Known.. and Eaten*, is available\* from the publisher, the **Essex County Greenbelt Association**, by calling (978) 768-7241 ext. 10 or writing [alexandra@ecga.org](mailto:alexandra@ecga.org). [\*while the Greenbelt office is technically closed at present, so books cannot be mailed, anyone purchasing a book through Greenbelt who is able to drive up to their office in Essex can pick up their pre-purchased book there. You can also buy the book online from **B Street Books** ([www.bstreetbooks.com](http://www.bstreetbooks.com)), and have it mailed directly to you.

