

# MOTHER NATURE'S CHEMICAL WEAPONS POISON SUMAC



Poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix* or *Rhus vernix*) is a woody shrub or small tree growing to 7 m (20 ft.) tall. All parts of the plant contain the resin, Urushiol, which causes skin and mucous membrane irritation to humans. When burned, inhalation of the smoke may cause the rash to appear on the lining of the lungs, causing extreme pain and possibly fatal respiratory difficulty.

Poison sumac is a shrub or small tree, up to 20 feet in height, with 7-13 oval leaflets per pinnate leaf. These are oval to oblong; acuminate (tapering to a sharp point); cuneate (wedge-shaped) at the base; undulate (wavy-edged); underside is glabrous (hair-less) or slightly pubescent (down-like hair) beneath, and are usually 2-4 inch long. In general appearance, the leaves resemble ash, but the leaf stems are always red, which is the best distinguishing characteristic of Poison Sumac.

Poison Sumac flowers are greenish, in loose axillary panicles (clusters) 3-8 inches long. The fruits are subglobose (not quite spherical), gray to grayish-white shiny berry, flattened and about 0.2 inches across. Hanging in slender, drooping clusters. These ripen in September and remain on the tree until the following Spring.

Poison Sumac grows exclusively in very wet or flooded soils, usually in swamps and peat bogs, in the eastern United States and Canada.



In terms of its potential to cause Urushiol-induced contact dermatitis, Poison Sumac is far more virulent than its relatives Poison Ivy and Poison Oak. According to some botanists, Poison Sumac is the most toxic plant species in the United States (Frankel, 1991).



Poison Sumac Severe Exposure and Reaction



Poison Sumac Mild Exposure and Reaction

The poison shows itself in painful and long continued swellings and eruptions. The poison is similar in effect to that of the closely related Poison Ivy, but is even more virulent. With both, infection is usually due to contact. The sap becomes gummy on drying and is often carried to other parts of the body by the hands. For first aid, wash the exposed parts with hot water and strong soap to remove as much of the poison as possible. The regular Staghorn Sumac is found on dry sites and has reddish berries in upright clusters. Staghorn Sumac is not poisonous.



Staghorn Sumac – non-poisonous



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