NATIVE WILD FOODS:

by Dick Deuerling and Peggy Lantz

Indian Lemonade

Sumac is a member of the cashew family. The *Rhus* genus contains several different species and many different common names.

Shining Sumac (*Rhus copallina*) is the species most likely to be encountered in Florida, for it is the only sumac whose range covers the entire state. It is a small tree or large shrub, with feather-like compound leaves, containing 9 to 21 leaflets with no teeth. It has "wings" on the stem in between the leaflets.

Shining sumac is a pretty bush, for its leaves turn bright red in the fall before dropping off for the winter. The flowers are small and yellow-green, borne in clusters at the ends of the branches that bend downwards in fall as fruit matures.

Fruits are small (about 1/8"), dark red berries covered with hairs. The berries are coated with malic acid, the same chemical that puts the taste in apples. The malic acid is on the outside; tannic acid is on the inside of the berry.

You know the berries are ripe when you can touch your tongue to them (or touch your finger to the berries and then lick your finger) and taste the unmistakable acid taste. Gather the clusters of berries after a dry spell, because rain washes off the malic acid, which is what gives us the taste.

Harvest enough to last for the year by just clipping off the clusters. Store them in a drawstring bag in a dry airy place. I hang mine from the rafters in the carport.

Indian lemonade is made by soaking the berries in hot water from the faucet. Don't use boiling water, and don't wash them or you'll wash away all the goody. Remove the stems, and soak the berries for half an hour, stirring occasionally. Then strain the juice, to get rid of the hairs, through a couple of layers of cloth—an old sheet, a pillowcase, or a jelly bag, and then a second time through a coffee filter. Use about two cups of berries to two liters of water. Add sugar or other sweetener to taste. Presto! Indian lemonade! The Cherokee Indians called it "quallah".

For those who smoke, sumac leaves can be dried and used as a substitute for tobacco.

The only other edible sumac in Florida is *Rhus glabra*, which occurs in a few counties in north Florida. It also has compound leaves with 11 to 25 toothed leaflets, but no wings. Its twigs are covered with a whitish waxy bloom that can be rubbed off. Its fruit is very bright red. The plant ranges up the east coast to Maine and over to Michigan. Its berries can be used the same as *R. copallina*.

If you travel in the fall, you can find sumac as you go. There are other species farther north and out west.

Staghorn sumac *Rhus typhina*, for example, can be found from north Georgia to Maine and Michigan. Its common name comes from the appearance of the winter silhouette of the tree, which looks like a deer's antlers.

It has 11 to 31 leaflets, and its twigs are thick and covered with long, soft, brown hairs. The fruit, as with the other edible varieties, forms in clusters on the ends of the branches, and are dark red.

The only other sumac in the east is fragrant sumac *Rhus aromatica*. Little is known about this upright shrub, except that it has leaves of three, like poison ivy. The leaves are toothed. It bears red terminal fruits, with a flavor a little stronger than *R. copallina*. It grows in a small area in north Georgia, North and South Carolina, Virginia, and a ways west.

Traveling west, there are numerous small shrubs and trees in this genus, all of which make good lemonade. They all have red berries in terminal clusters and the malic acid taste when you touch them to your tongue. I used squaw bush in Arizona to make a delicious drink.

Sumac is an example of the usefulness of scientific names. In

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Poison Sumac

When I prepare Indian lemonade for programs, a lot of people say, "I thought sumac was poisonous." So we'd better say something about poison sumac.

Only one species is poisonous: *Toxicodendron vernix*, synonym *Rhus vernix*, and it cannot be mistaken for the edible ones. All edible ones have berries in terminal clusters (on the ends of the branches) in some shade of red. Poison sumac has white berries, originating from the leaf axils (where the leaf stems meet the branch) on long-stemmed, droopy, loose clusters.

Poison sumac leaves are compound, as are other sumacs, but with only 7 to 15 leaflets. The rachis (stem to which the leaflets are attached) and the young twigs are red.

Unlike other sumacs, this plant is a wetlands species. Its range is from Orange County north through Florida up to Maine and Michigan.

Touching any part of poison sumac can cause itchy blisters. Even smoke from burning plants is hazardous. The *Rhus* genus includes *Toxicodendron radicans*, synonym *Rhus radicans*, which is poison ivy. General consensus is that poison oak is a form of poison ivy, not another species. All have the same blistering effect as poison sumac.

• Dick Deuerling

Florida, *Rhus copallina* is called shining sumac. In the Appalachian Mountains, it becomes mountain sumac. In West Virginia and Pennsylvania, it becomes scarlet sumac. In the northern end of its range in Maine, it is called dwarf sumac or winged sumac. But it's still *Rhus copallina* all the way. Linneaus did a good thing when he devised this system. Saves a lot of confusion.

Now for some recipes.

Sumac jelly. It's really easy. The juice is already prepared. Buy a package of Sure-Jell and follow the recipe for elderberry jelly, using 3 cups of juice and 4 1/2 cups of sugar. But omit the lemon juice because you want the lemony taste of sumac instead. It makes a fantastic jelly.

Sumac jello. Mix the Indian lemonade, already sweetened, with unflavored gelatin as per the instructions on the gelatin package.

Sumac rubber candy. Bring one cup of Indian lemonade, already sweetened, just to a boil. Add two envelopes of unflavored gelatin, and mix until completely dissolved. Pour into an 8x8 or 8x10 baking pan, and refrigerate for about an hour. Cut and serve. This is an old Girl Scout recipe from my wife.

There are lots and lots of other recipes that can apply here. Be creative.