

Aid for What Ails You

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One of the most vibrant fall leaf colours hails from a humble source. While many people consider it a weed, and some even think it dangerous, the common staghorn sumac treats us to a brilliant, neon-red-orange burst of colour each fall. Its reputation as a nuisance is well-founded, as it can spread by means of its root system into fields and pastures, but sumac is not a hazard.

When I was a kid, Dad pointed out poison ivy to me and also warned, sight unseen, against poison sumac. Just as “Marco” always went with “Polo,” “poison” was followed by either “ivy” or “sumac” in my mind. Having led innumerable nature walks, I know that many folks also grew up equating sumac with poison.

Staghorn sumac is not only safe to touch, it tastes great. A native small tree, or maybe a large shrub, sumac reaches a mature height of between 2 and 10 metres. It is dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are on separate plants.

Mind you, poison sumac does exist. It’s just that very few people ever see it. If you do, as I have, you’ll be ankle-deep or so in water. Poison sumac is an obligate wetland plant, requiring saturated, and very often flooded, soils. Poison sumac is a swamp-thing, and other than the fact it has compound leaves and is a shrub, it bears little resemblance to the sumac we see every day.

Poison sumac has loose bunches of berries that turn whitish when mature, and they droop down. “Good” sumac, on the other hand, has tight clusters of red berries held up as if the tree is proud of them. Poison sumac has shiny leaves, smooth glossy twigs, and its leaves turn yellow in the fall. In contrast, staghorn sumac has fuzzy twigs. Its matte-finish leaves turn a vibrant red in autumn.

There are several species of “good” sumac, and all have the same red berries held aloft. Many migrant songbirds depend on sumac berries if they arrive to a snow-covered breeding ground. The stuff that makes apples tangy is malic acid, and sumac berries are loaded with this tasty water-soluble flavouring. To make “sumac-ade” all you need is a plastic bucket full of sumac berry bunches (don’t pick them individually), which you then fill with cold water. Agitate the berries a few minutes and strain through a clean cloth. This leaves you with a very sour pink beverage, which you can sweeten to taste.

Because malic acid is water-soluble, sumac berries lose some (but by no means all) of their flavour by springtime. The next time sumac’s bright red fall “flag” catches your eye, consider stopping to collect some berries to make a refreshing drink. And the sooner the better.

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