



**Coppice of winged sumac**

*T. Davis Snyder, Ohio State University*

# Native Plant Highlight: Winged Sumac

## *Rhus copallinum*

by Amy Carter, Coastal Plains Chapter,  
Georgia Native Plant Society

### Description

***Rhus copallinum*** or winged sumac is a deciduous upright shrub that can be a colorful addition to your landscape. Other common names include shining sumac, flameleaf sumac, dwarf sumac, wing-rib sumac, black sumac, and upland sumac. Winged Sumac gets its name from the winged stalk between leaflets. Unlike poison sumac (***Toxicodendron vernix***), for which it is often mistaken, it is not a skin irritant.

A member of the cashew family, this sumac is considered a large shrub or small tree usually growing to about 10 feet although it can reach heights of 20 to 35 feet or more in good soils. It has a small, short trunk with open branching. The shiny green leaves of winged sumac are pinnately compound, alternate and spiral up stems. Leaflet margins are usually entire (or serrate), elliptic to lanceolate in shape, 3-8 cm long, and 1-3 cm wide. Leaves turn a shiny bright red in the fall. Unlike other sumacs winged sumac has a watery sap. Male and female flowers usually occur on separate trees so both are necessary for fertile seed production. Flowers occur in showy greenish-white clusters during summer months.



**Leaf with winged rachis**  
Vern Wilkins, Indiana University



**Fall foliage** Chris Evans, University of Illinois

(continued from page 33)

**Natural habitats**

Winged sumac can occur in a wide variety of habitats including open woodlands, right-of-ways, limestone outcrops, margins and forest edges. It colonizes disturbed areas readily such as roadsides, fence rows and fields. This hardy plant does well in good soils but is often found in sandy acidic soils. It has a high tolerance for acid, sandy or rocky poor soils. It survives burning and is drought tolerant, preferring dry conditions.

**In your Landscape**

Winged sumac is a nice addition to your garden. It is often planted as an ornamental because of its shiny green leaves and red to brown fruit. In the fall

its bright red leaves add a splash of nice color to any landscape and its persistent fruits can be seen throughout the winter months. It is generally fast growing and with few disease or pest problems. Coupled with its drought-tolerance and minimal soil needs it can thrive in most landscapes in our area.

Winged sumac is a good choice for recently denuded land such as in a new development. The leaves are acidic and can help to rebuild soil that has been stripped of organic matter. It can be useful as a soil stabilizer because of its extensive root system. If grown in open spaces it requires little or no maintenance. It is a good edge plant for along driveways and lawns as it prefers full sun and is easily shaded out when overhead canopy is present. In more full garden spaces it may require removal of suckers that are easily pulled or dug and replanted if desired.

This sumac has beautiful shiny green leaves for the spring and summer which turn a bright red for showy fall color. This plant blooms in July-August with green to cream colored clumps of flowers that mature into red to brown fruit clusters for the fall that persist through winter. It is a good ornamental having something of interest in every season.

Winged sumac can be grown from scarified seeds, transplanted divisions of colonies, or cuttings of semi-hardwood cuttings taken in the summer or fall. Transplanted divisions from colonies survive transplanting well. It is also commercially available for purchase.



**Fruits** James H. Miller & Ted Bodner,  
Southern Weed Science Society

## Benefits

The berries of *Rhus copallinum* can be eaten and are reported to produce a nice lemony drink when added to water. Most recipes call for cold water. Oil from the seed can be extracted to make candles. Seeds have also been used to make a black dye. Fall leaves collected as they fall can be used to make a brown dye and oil from the sap can be used to make varnish.

The leaves, bark, and roots of winged sumac are reported to have been used medicinally for various ailments from skin irritations to mouth sores.

Winged sumac is an important wildlife food source in the fall and winter due to the fact that the fruit is persistent through the winter. It is an important food source for game birds and many song birds. Large and small mammals eat the berries, deer browse on the twigs and rabbits will eat the bark. The

flowers are visited by butterflies, native bees and honey bees providing them with food. Native bees use this sumac for nesting materials/structure and it is a butterfly host plant. 🌿



**Inflorescence** Karan Rawlins, UGA

**Photos are all from Bugwood.org**

## References

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