

Rhus copallinum

Winged sumac; sumac; shining sumac

Family: Anacardiaceae



A flowering shining sumac near Dade City, Pasco County, Florida, late August



A cluster of panicles appears at the terminal end, late August

Synonyms (Discarded Names): *Rhus copallina*; *C. copallinum* var. *latifolia*

Origin: Eastern U.S. from Maine, west to Michigan, south to Texas and Florida

U.S.D.A. Zone: 5-11 (Minimum of -20°F)

Growth Rate: Fast

Flowering Months: Spring into early Fall

Leaf Persistence: Deciduous, turning bright orange-red in Fall; nearly evergreen in the south

Salt Wind Tolerance: Low; salt wind may burn the leaves

Drought Tolerance: High

Soil: Wide range; well-drained

Nutritional Requirements: Low

Major Pests: Free of serious pests; several fungi can cause problems

Typical Dimensions: 10 to 24 feet by 5 to 10 feet in South Florida

Propagation: By seed and suckers

Human hazards: This is a non-poisonous relative of poison sumac.

Uses: Native gardens, Fruits are eaten by birds and other wildlife



A shrub is noticed from afar by its contrasting inflorescences. Gainesville, Florida, late August

Natural Geographic Distribution and Ecological Function

Winged sumac is a member of the Cashew family. The *Rhus* genus contains several different species and many different common names. Winged sumac is the species most likely to be found in Florida, for it is the only species whose range covers the entire state. Winged sumac ranges from Maine, west to Michigan and south to Texas and Florida. It grows in dry woods, sandhills, roadsides, abandoned fields and disturbed areas. In South Florida it makes a somewhat weedy plant of pinelands and hammock margins, never persisting in the dense shade of well-established woods. The plant provides cover for wildlife. The flowers supply nectar and pollen for insects. The fruits are edible by wildlife and humans and can be processed into jelly. Native Americans used fruit to make dye and the roots to treat dysentery. Winged sumac does not cause skin irritations like other members of its family including poison sumac and poison ivy.



Pollinators on a flower cluster in late August



Wasp pollinator

Morphology, Growth Habit and Reproduction

Winged sumac is distinguished from other sumacs by its winged rachis and watery sap. It is usually a large shrub or at most a small tree with sparse, divergent branches and a short crooked trunk. When in the landscape, it is usually as broad as it is tall, often reaching to 20 feet in height. Stems and twigs are densely pubescent, covered with numerous lenticels when young, and later with large, thin scales. The bark is light brown or grey. Individual shoots are determinate either because they end in a panicle of flower or because the terminal bud aborts at the time of flowering.

Winged sumac is recognized by its long-odd pinnate alternating leaves with a winged rachis. The leaf can reach one foot long with 9 to 23 leaflets per leaf. Leaflets are entire. The upper surfaces are mostly glabrous; lower surfaces are pubescent. The rachis, the main axis of the leaf, is winged. The species is dioecious having both male and female plants. Tiny, yellowish-green flowers appear on current shoots in dense terminal cluster. They emerge from spring through summer. The flower clusters are six to ten inches long. Only the female plants produce fruit. The fruit is a one-seeded drupe, about 1/4 inches, covered with short, sticky, reddish hairs. The fruits hang in terminal panicles that bend downward and may persist into winter.

Vegetative growth ceases with flowering in summer. In Southwest Florida, the plant becomes deciduous in late fall. Vegetative growth returns in spring. Plants can be propagated by suckers and by seed. Place scarified seed in soil 1/3 inch to 3/4 inch deep in the fall or winter. Plants can also be transplanted easily by division of colony. Colonies are often single sexed, formed from a single, suckering plant. Winged sumac should be planted in full sun for best flowering and fruiting.



The pinnate leaf is mostly glabrous and lustrous above



The leaf is usually pubescent beneath



The rachis is winged



Leaves are odd-pinnate and alternate on the stem



Panicles of yellow-green flowers appear in spring and summer



Maturing drupes, early September, Hickory Creek, Lee County



Mature dull reddish drupes, Hickory Creek, mid-November



Young limb of winged sumac,
note lenticels



A limb of middle age



The most mature limb

Planting and Maintenance Guidelines

Winged sumac is used in native plant restorations where a fast-growing, thicket-forming shrub is needed on barren ground. It is appropriate for large naturalist settings and woodland edges where its aggressive nature will not pose a control problem. It can be very aggressive in the garden, spreading from root suckers many yards away from the parent tree. Plant it in a sunny location. Sandy, acid soil is best for growth. It does not require any supplemental water once established and does not tolerate long term flooding. Its leaves turn bright red in the fall before dropping off for the winter. Its fall color is most showy after an early cold front following a dry summer. It may be shaded out by maturing hardwood.

References

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