The Sumac Family of Native Shrubs

There are well over one hundred native woody shrubs and vines in the Hill Country and adjoining areas. Today I want to discuss one family of those shrubs.

Depending on the source one consults and how different species are classified, there are somewhere between 6 and 10 species of sumacs in Texas. But the four most common species in Texas, all of which can be found in the Hill Country/Edwards Plateau, are Aromatic Sumac, Prairie Flameleaf Sumac, Evergreen Sumac and Littleleaf Sumac.

While there are significant differences in their appearances, they are all shrubs or small trees and they all produce red berries. They are all in the Anacardiaceae family (sometimes referred to as the Cashew family) which also includes Texas Pistache, American Smoke Tree and Poison Ivy.

Aromatic Sumac, also called Skunkbush, (Rhus aromatica) is a 3 to 12 foot shrub that grows in the eastern half to two-thirds of North America. It has compound, alternate leaves that are trifoliate (three leaflets attached to a central stem) that are pungent, but not really unpleasant, when crushed. It produces small yellowish catkin-like flowers before the leaves appear in March or April. The red berries are covered with fuzz and ripen in June. The leaves turn red, yellow and orange in the fall. Aromatic Sumac is the larval host for the Banded Hairstreak butterfly.

Prairie Flameleaf Sumac (Rhus lanceolata) is a shrub or small tree to 25 feet or so tall. It is native to Oklahoma, north, central and west Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and Mexico. It has compound leaves with, usually, 10 to 20 slightly sickle-shaped pairs of 2 to 4 inch leaflets. These leaflets turn red and orange in the fall, which gives these sumacs their name. One identification feature that distinguishes Prairie Flameleaf Sumacs from other woody plants with compound leaves is that the central stem to which the leaflets are attached, called the “rachis”, is usually flattened or “winged” toward the end of the leaf. The bark is largely smooth except for that on older trees. These trees are heat, cold and drought tolerant. They are very fast-growing, but usually relatively short-lived as well

Prairie Flameleaf Sumacs produce large branched clusters of whitish flowers on the ends of branches. These in turn produce large clusters of red berries in the fall which may turn brown and persist through the winter if the birds don’t eat them first. These sumacs are fairly prolific at forming root-sprouts, which may make for dense thickets in areas where the deer do not eat all of the sprouts. Prairie Flameleaf Sumacs are also a larval host for Hairstreak butterflies. We have a beautifully-shaped 18-foot tall Prairie Flameleaf Sumac that came up “volunteer” in our yard 12 or 14 years ago.

Littleleaf Sumac, or Desert Sumac (Rhus microphylla) is a 4 to 12-foot multi-trunk shrub primarily of the western half of Texas, also found in Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona. As the name implies, it has very small compound leaves with 5 to 9 leaflets, each only about a half inch long and covered with tiny hairs. This sumac also shows a "winged" rachis. It produces tiny white blooms in April, usually before the leaves come out and then small orange-red berries. Desert sumac provides food and cover for wildlife and is quite drought tolerant.

Evergreen Sumac (Rhus virens), as the name implies is an evergreen shrub with compound leaves made up of glossy, leathery, oval leaflets. The leaves look similar to those on Texas Mountain laurel. It can become a large multi-trunk shrub. Flowers are small creamy-white in clusters in the summer that are favorites of bees. These sumacs are frequently planted in landscapes because of their dark green, evergreen appearance. Deer will eat them occasionally, but it is not their favorite food.

Evergreen Sumacs are not truly "evergreen". Instead, they are evergreen in the same sense that Live Oaks are. They keep their leaves throughout the winter and then drop their leaves and replace them with new leaves, all within about a week, in the spring.

There is one more sumac that is worth mentioning, although it does not grow in the Edwards Plateau. Poison Sumac (Toxicodendron vernix) is more closely related to poison ivy and poison oak than to the other sumacs, and is found only in the extreme eastern-most counties of Texas and points east.

Hope everyone had a Merry Christmas and that you have a Healthy Native New Year.

Until next time…

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