

### *Rhus glabra*

[Synonyms : *Rhus borealis*, *Rhus calophylla*, *Rhus carolinianum*, *Rhus cismontana*, *Rhus elegans*, *Rhus glabra* var. *cismontana*, *Rhus glabra* var. *laciniata*, *Rhus glabra* var. *occidentalis*, *Rhus virginium*, *Schmaltzia glabra*, *Toxicodendron glabrum*]

**SMOOTH SUMACH** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has small yellowish-green flowers and leaves that turn red or orange-yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as *Chazi* (Dakota North American Indian), Common sumac, Common sumach, *Haz-ni-hu* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Kahler Sumach* (German), *Mibdi-hi* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), *Nuppikt* (Pawnee North American Indian), Pennsylvania sumach, Red sumac, Red sumach, Rocky mountain sumac, Scarlet sumac, *Scharlachsumach* (German), Smooth sumac, Smooth upland sumac, Sumach, Upland sumach, and Vinegar tree.

Smooth sumach's appearance can be confused with that of poisonous varieties in this genus. *Glabra* is Latin (hairless, bald) meaning 'hairless or smooth'.

North American Indian tribes have found many uses for the smooth sumach. A beverage was made from the sour astringent tasting, hairy bright red berry-like fruit by several tribes. The fruit were crushed to make a cool drink in Summer by Meskwaki Indians, and the Chippewa cooked them with maple sugar for a hot Winter drink (known to have been prepared by the Iroquois and Meskwaki tribes too). Okanagan-Colville Indians used the seed heads to make a tea. The fruit were also eaten fresh, or dried for use in Winter (especially by the Gosiute, and Cherokee Indians and Comanche children), and the peeled fresh roots and shoots were eaten raw, particularly by the Iroquois. Children in some of the Apache tribe ate the bark as a delicacy.

The Kiowa, Comanche, Winnebago, Dakota, Cheyenne, Gosiute, Plains Indian, Tewa, Ponca, Chippewa, Omaha and Pawnee tribes are some of the many who dried the red Autumn leaves and smoked them in tobacco mixtures. For the Okanagan-Colville however the changing leaf colour was a signal that the salmon were beginning to spawn – and the Thompson Indians used the younger leaves as basket covers.

Records appear to be a little confusing about the colours of the dyes made from different parts of the plant by various North American Indian tribes. Apparently Thompson Indians used the juice for staining. The records suggest that the Plains Indian tribe used the leaves, bark and roots to obtain both a grey and a black colour – and that a black dye was also made by the Cherokee with the fruit. Kiowa Indians used the roots (dug up in the Spring) to make an orange dye, whereas some of the Chippewa achieved a similar colour using the inner bark as an ingredient with others. Both Chippewa and Cherokee tribes used the fruit for a red dye. Perhaps however the most confusing of all is the wide variety of ways in which the plant is said to have yielded a yellow dye. The Meskwaki and Winnebago tribes both used the roots, and Chippewa Indians employed either the stalks or the inner bark with other ingredients. Omaha Indians made a yellow dye with the roots or the inner bark, and the Plains Indian tribe are said to have used the leaves, bark and roots (as they did apparently for a black or grey dye).

Some of the Chippewa tribe used a smooth sumach potion during ceremonial rituals.

The plant has provided a source of medicine for quite a few North American Indian tribes, including the Thompson, Iroquois, some of the Chippewa and the Kiowa Indians. A decoction of the flowers was given by the Chippewa tribe (particularly to teething children) as a gargle or mouth wash to ease sore mouths or a sore throat, while other tribes (such as the Thompson, some of the Okanagan-Colville tribe and the Sanpoil Indians) chewed the root or the leaves to heal oral sores – and Kutenai Indians used root juice. It seems that some tribes including the Flathead and Kiowa used smooth sumach in treatments for tuberculosis. Chippewa Indians turned to it for treating asthma and colds, it was a remedy for some heart problems for the Okanagan-Colville, and the Thompson Indians prescribed it for treating gastric ulcers. Various female problems were treated with it by the Pawnee, some of the Dakota tribe, the Omaha, Okanagan-Colville and the Cherokee Indians. Pawnee Indians also used it to ease diarrhoea, while the Creek and Chippewa tribes took it for dysentery – and the Cherokee and Chippewa Indians both employed it to ease vomiting. Urinary troubles were cured with the plant by the Omaha, some of the Dakota and the Cherokee tribes, and fluid retention was targeted with it specifically by the Omaha. Flathead Indians used smooth sumach as a purgative, and the Meskwaki tribe relied upon it to enhance flagging appetite. Both the Okanagan-Colville and Thompson tribes used it to treat venereal disease. Ear problems were sorted out with it by Micmac Indians, and some of the Chippewa valued it for resolving some eye disorders. As if this were not enough records show that Nez Perce Indians and the Okanagan-Colville, Omaha, Meskwaki and Cherokee tribes all applied it for various skin disorders. Cherokee Indians used it to ease and heal sunburn, and the Okanagan-Colville applied it for frostbite.

In North America tannin has been extracted commercially from both the leaves and the bark for tanning leather (giving it a yellow colour). An infusion of the fruit has also provided a black wool dye. The roots have given an orange-yellow dye

The seeds offer an oil that can be used to make candles that will burn brightly but will give off pungent smoke.

Authorities believe that smooth sumach was introduced to Britain around 1726 from south-eastern North America.

Medicinally, herbalists have recommended the bark for treating diarrhoea, gonorrhoea, dysentery and fever, and they have prescribed the fruit in the treatment of diabetes, bowel complaints, oral ulcers and skin disorders. Today the berries can still be used as a remedy for bowel disorders.