

Rhus toxicodendron

[Synonyms : *Rhus quercifolia*, *Rhus radicans*, *Rhus rydbergii*, *Rhus varracosa*, *Toxicodendron pubescens*, *Toxicodendron quercifolium*, *Toxicodendron radicans*, *Toxicodendron toxicodendron*, *Toxicodendron typhinum*]

POISON OAK is a deciduous shrub. Native to southern and eastern North America it has small greenish-white flowers and leaves that turn brilliant orange and scarlet in Autumn. It is also known as Atlantic poison oak, Black mercury vine, Climath, Climbing sumach, *Giftefeu* (German), *Giftsumach* (German), *Hthi-wathe-hi* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Markery, Mercury, *Myrkkysumakki* (Finnish), Oakleaf poison ivy, Page oak, Picry, Poison creeper, Poison ivy, Poison sumach, Poison vine, Shrubby poison oak, *Sumach* (German), Three-leaved ivy, and Trailing sumach.

Warning – all parts of the plant are poisonous. Handling or close proximity to the plant (and even the touch of the smoke from the burning wood) can cause an allergic reaction (that varies in intensity with the individual – and can be recurrent). It must not be taken internally unless under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. Externally it can cause itching, inflammation, blistering, swelling, ulceration and intolerable pain. Internally it can cause severe irritation of the digestive system and death. (Having said this however there are some people who seem to have a built-in immunity.)

Poison oak is similar in appearance to poison ivy (*Rhus radicans*) but unlike the latter its leaves are more rounded and the fruit are not waxy.

Toxicodendron is derived from Latin *toxicum* (arrow poison) and *dendro-* (tree) components meaning ‘poisonous tree’.

Despite the fact that many of the North American Indian tribes including the Ponca, Omaha, Potawatomi and Paiute Indians believed the shrub was poisonous it still provided a source of medicine for quite a few not least the Delaware tribe. For example it offered a sedative and a remedy for oral sores for the Iroquois, the Cherokee used it to cause vomiting, and both the Potawatomi and Meskwaki Indians included it as a treatment for some skin problems.

Medicinally, herbalists used it to treat tuberculosis, paralysis, rheumatism and some skin disorders. Today it is used in homoeopathic remedies.