

Rhus trilobata

[Synonyms : *Rhus aromatica* var. *trilobata*, *Schmaltzia bakeri*, *Schmaltzia trilobata*]

SQUAW BUSH is a deciduous shrub. Native to south-western North America (specifically California) it has minute greenish-yellow flowers.

It is also known as Ill scented sumac, *Kose otsi* (Zuni North American Indian), Lemonade sumac, Lemonade sumach, Skunk bush, Skunkbush sumac, and Squaw berry.

Trilobata is made up of Latin *tri-* (three) and *lobi-* (lobe) components meaning ‘three-lobed’.

Long sucker shoots (stems) have been used by American Indians, including the North American Havasupai, Great Basin Indian, Navajo, Mahuna, Tewa, some of the Apache, the Luiseño, Pomo, Zuni, Wintoon, Hopi, Hualapai, Cahuilla, some of the Keresan, the Panamint and the Mewuk for at least three and a half thousand years for making baskets and figures – and to encourage shoots of the necessary length the bushes were burnt.

Some tribes (such as some of the Keresan Indians and the Navajo tribe) used the wood for bows, while others such as the North American Hopi gathered it for making prayer sticks or for ceremonial fuel. Stems were used by the Zuni and Navajo in ritual offerings (the latter used the wood and pollen as well), and the Hopi fashioned them into cradles. When the stems were split they provided thread for the Navajo for sewing hats and water bottles.

For some tribes such as the Kiowa, Cheyenne and Keresan the leaves provided an ingredient for tobacco mixtures.

While the Hopi used buds as a deodorant or perfume, some of the Navajo used squaw bush in a lotion that was believed to be able to counter hair loss. Among Hualapai Indians the leaves were thought to be able to repel snakes as well as insects when worn upon the person.

The berries contain tannin and the Hopi at least employed them for dyeing wool and as an ingredient in body paint. Different parts of the shrub have been used for dyeing by the North American tribes. Apart from specific colours some such as the Navajo used it to set dyes – the Hopi and Dakota Indians used the fruit for this purpose, and the Hualapai used the roots. Great Basin Indians employed the bark and leaves to get a brown dye, and the twigs as an ingredient with others to obtain a black one. For a black dye the Navajo used the leaves, and they also made a blue dye with the shrub. Dakota Indians obtained a red dye from the fruit, while Great Basin Indians are said to have made a pink dye with them. Some of the Keresan used fruit juice as an ingredient in making paint.

The sour sticky red berries were a popular source of food familiar to many North American Indian tribes, including the Navajo for whom they were a staple part of their diet. The fresh fruit were eaten by the Gosiute, Hopi, Wintoon, Montana Indian, Navajo, Cahuilla, some of the Apache, the Keresan, Tewa, Kiowa, Yokut and Hualapai tribes – and the Isleta Indians and some of the Keresan ate them as an appetizer. Navajo Indians made the fruit into cakes. The Cahuilla used them to make soup, some of the Keresan added them to dishes as a flavouring, and the Mahuna chewed them as a thirst quencher. The berries were made into a porridge-like mush by both the Navajo and Luiseño Indians, and the Atsugewi and some of the Apache tribe preserved the fruit as jam. Several tribes including the Havasupai, some of the Apache, the Navajo, Shoshoni and Atsugewi

harvested, dried and stored the berries for future use, and many Indian tribes not least the Cahuilla, Great Basin Indian, some of the Keresan, the Atsugewi, Shoshoni, Hopi, Navajo, some of the Apache, the Kiowa, Havasupai and Hualapai made various non-alcoholic drinks with the fruit. (The Hopi are known to have used the berries to make a kind of 'lemonade', hence one of the plant's names.)

Cheyenne Indians treated their sick horses with squaw bush.

The shrub was a source of medicine for quite a few North American Indian tribes including the Hopi. Some of the Navajo, the Mahuna, some of the Keresan and the Kiowa all used it for stomach upsets, and some of the Navajo also turned to it for treating bowel disorders. Both the Cheyenne and Comanche tribes prescribed it for easing colds, the Hopi Indians used it to treat tuberculosis, and the Kiowa took it for influenza. It was used during childbirth by some of the Navajo and some of the Keresan Indians, but while it was viewed as the source of an aphrodisiac among Cheyenne Indians, the Navajo tribe relied on taking a leaf decoction as a contraceptive. Water retention was treated with it by the Cheyenne, and some of the Keresan Indians used it to cause vomiting. Smallpox sores were dusted with the powdered fruit by the Paiute, Montana Indian, Yokia, Round Valley Indian and Blackfoot tribes. Some of the Navajo treated poison ivy sores with it, the Cheyenne applied it to burns, and some of the Keresan Indians used it to treat oral problems. Cheyenne Indians also used squaw bush to ease toothache.