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Rhus vernix

[Synonyms : *Rhus venenata*, *Rhus verniciflua*, *Toxicodendron vernix*]

POISON ELDER is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to eastern North America it has purplish stalked tiny, greenish-yellow or whitish flowers and leaves that turn orange and scarlet in the Autumn.

It is also known as Dogwood, Poison ash, Poison dogwood, Poison sumac, Poison sumach, Poisonweed, Poison wood, Swamp sumach, and Thunderwood.

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. 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. (A liquid extract of grindelia, *Grindelia camporum*, has been recommended by some authorities as an antidote for poisoning from poison elder and its relatives.) Internally it can cause severe irritation of the digestive system leading to death.

Vernix means ‘varnish’.

As with some other close relatives this one’s poisonous nature was not unknown to North American Indian tribes as witness the records of Chippewa and Cherokee references to it. Authorities note that despite (or taking into account perhaps) awareness of this the Cherokee Indians used the plant medicinally to treat fever, asthma, various urinary ailments and some skin disorders

Both game and song birds are unaffected by the poisons and feed on the berries which persist through Winter.

Poison elder was introduced to Britain from eastern North America in 1713.

Medicinally, herbalists have used the resin to treat piles.