



Photo courtesy: Steve Gray, Kentucky Division of Forestry

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

by Diana Olszowy

Littlest Big Champ: Shining Sumac

When most folks hear that a tree is a national champion, they envision a magnificent, monstrous oak or towering yellow-poplar. Kentucky currently has 11 national champs and the smallest, but largest, champ is located in Bullitt County. Smallest but largest—what does that mean? Shining sumac (also called winged sumac), is closely related to staghorn sumac, smooth sumac and poison sumac and is in the same family (Anacardiaceae) as poison ivy. Shining sumac is normally considered a shrubby species, averaging 5 to 7 feet in height, and is often multi-stemmed. It is a fast growing but short-lived species. Often found growing in thickets along roadways, fencerows, and along the edge of woodlands, sumacs rarely have the opportunity to develop into a tree. But that is exactly what this 35-foot-tall, 29-inches-in-circumference shining sumac did.

Shining sumac is labeled as a “pioneer species,” which means that it is often one of the first species to colonize an area. Preferring sites with full sunlight, shining sumac can often out-compete young pine and hardwoods by its ability to sprout from its roots and root crowns. Shining sumac is easily identifiable by its hairy, winged stems and long, paired leaflets. It is an attractive plant with glossy dark green leaves that turn scarlet red in the fall. Shining sumac tolerates compacted soils, drought, and pollution, which makes it an excellent selection for urban landscapes.

Shining sumac is nonpoisonous to humans and the fresh fruits can be used to make a lemon-tasting beverage. It was also used by Native Americans to treat dysentery and mouth sores. Dense thickets serve as cover for birds and mammals. The seeds are eaten by a variety of birds, and the flowers attract butterflies. Deer and rabbits commonly browse the twigs in winter, and rabbits also eat the bark. Though the seeds, bark, and leaves are low in nutritional value, they have high tannin content and have been used by the leather industry. Because of its ability to sprout from roots coupled with its

rapid growth rate, shining sumac is a good species to plant for erosion control.

Though this sumac is the smallest of Kentucky’s national champs, it is definitely a monstrous specimen in the world of sumac. How many times have you stood in the shade of a sumac? Probably not too often.

Photos courtesy: Shining sumac leaf: Chris Evans, River to River CWMA, Bugwood.org; Poison sumac leaf: Troy Evans, Eastern Kentucky University, Bugwood.org

Shining Sumac



Poison Sumac



Leaves & Stems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • slender/lance shape • serrated edges • 13+ leaflets • winged stems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • oval shaped • smooth edges • 7 - 13 leaflets • stems always red
Fruits & Seed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • red fruits • terminal seed head 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grayish-white berries • clustered on small branches
Preferred Sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dry soils • uplands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wet soil conditions • swamps, river/pond edges

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