

SMOOTH SUMAC

Rhus glabra L.

Plant Symbol = RHGL

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Northeast Plant Materials Program



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Uses

Sumac serves primarily as a winter emergency food for wildlife. Ring-necked pheasant, bobwhite quail, wild turkey, and about 300 species of songbirds include sumac fruit in their diet. It is also known to be important only in the winter diets of ruffed grouse and the sharp-tailed grouse. Fox squirrels and cottontail rabbits eat the sumac bark. White-tail deer like the fruit and stems.

Sumac also makes good ornamental plantings and hedges because of the brilliant red fall foliage. It is best used on drastically disturbed sites where pioneer species are desirable.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Weediness

This plant may become weedy or invasive in some regions or habitats and may displace desirable vegetation if not properly managed. Please consult with your local NRCS Field Office, Cooperative Extension Service office, or state natural resource or agriculture department regarding its status and use.

Weed information is also available from the PLANTS Web site at plants.usda.gov.

Description

Anacardiaceae Family. Smooth sumac is a U.S. native, deciduous, large shrub to small tree, seldom over 10-15 feet tall. It has alternate, compound leaves, 16-24 inches long. The leaflets are narrowed or rounded at the base and sharply pointed at the tip with finely toothed edges. The leaflets are dark green and smooth above, and pale beneath, except along the midrib. Compact clusters of greenish-yellow flowers bloom from June to July, and fruits mature from August to September. The fruiting head is a compact cluster of round, red, hairy fruits called drupes. Each drupe measures ¼ inch in diameter and contains one seed. Each cluster of drupes may contain 100 to 700 seeds. Fruit is produced on plants 3 to 4 years old. Because most populations of sumac have male and female flowers on separate plants, only the female plants produce seed. Occasionally, plants are found which have both male and female flowers. The germination of sumac seeds is enhanced by their passage through the digestive system of rabbits, ring-necked pheasants, and quail. The presence of fire also encourages increased germination. There are about 75,000 seeds per pound.

Adaptation and Distribution

Smooth sumac is widely distributed throughout the United States. It is extremely drought resistant and is commonly found in open fields and roadsides, fence rows, railroad rights-of-way, and burned areas, on sandy or gravelly soil. All sumacs are tolerant of slightly acid soil conditions and textures ranging from coarse to fine. Sumacs are not highly shade tolerant and are considered early successional species.

For a current distribution map, please consult the Plant Profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

Establishment

One year old nursery grown seedlings are normally used for planting large areas. Once established, stands will spread from the root sprouts. The lateral root system is extensive and spread outward 3 or more feet a year. This sprouting is encouraged by cutting or fire injury. The colonies appear to lose vigor in about 15 years.

Management

Sumac stands can best be maintained by eliminating competing vegetation by mowing, chemicals, or fire. Sumacs fail to compete with invading tree species and are seldom found growing under a closed canopy.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

No known cultivars of this species are known to exist. Rooted plants may be available from specialty nurseries.

Control

Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what works best in your area and how to use it safely. Always read label and safety instructions for each control method. Trade names and control measures appear in this document only to provide specific information. USDA, NRCS does not guarantee or warranty the products and control methods named, and other products may be equally effective.

Prepared By & Species Coordinator:

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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