

PLANT OF THE WEEK

September 5, 2008

Shining Sumac

Rhus copallina

Welcome to the Fall Volume of Plant of the Week, also referred to as Liquid Sunshine. This last moniker comes from the newsletter that I started producing in 2003, the first year of my sojourn here at Yale's Marsh Botanical Garden. Because of the production values and the software package (In-Design), my staff (mostly Leslie Kuo, a summer intern) and I had to spend a lot of time on each issue. I therefore used rainy days for the project, hence the name 'Liquid Sunshine.' (By the way, the archives at our website [<http://www.yale.edu/marshgardens/>] will yield up previous columns. We haven't gotten to the task of indexing it yet, which is why I will be indexing these columns as I go)

For those of you who have signed up recently, I welcome you especially. Rest assured that your e-mail address is held sacred here, with no sale, loan or other abuse of my lists except when the bid is in the four figures, not counting decimal points. I am just kidding: under no circumstances will the list be abused.

I use the column to highlight plants that are of interest at the moment here at Marsh Gardens, in the New Haven area or plants that I think people would like to know about. Sometimes they are tropical, residing in one of our glass-houses, but often they are hale and hardy, up to the task of New England winters and increasingly sub-tropical summers. I welcome comments, questions, further elucidation, contributions (make checks payable to the Larson Fund for Indigent Gardeners) and even columns. I have one promised from a friend in California whose experience working for the Forest Service and living in the southern tier of the Siskiyou Mountains gives her unique voice some authority on fire as an instrument of nature's design for the health of the forest ecosystem. I have had many (well, a few) write to say, 'Well done, old boy!' and a great many corrections of spelling, grammar and content. My work should be proofread, as my loving spouse insists, but I hesitate to tax her already busy day with another task. In the meantime, please bear with me and write back with your suggested corrections.

Sometimes I bring back a character known as 'the Colonel,' retired from the British Army. His irascible personality is exceeded only by his ability to make me laugh.

Our Plant this week is in the late stages of flowering. Shining Sumac blooms in late summer, often well into September. The pale greenish-yellow flowers are held well above the mass of leaves in compact terminal panicles. The flowers are replaced by the tight seed-clusters that are so familiar to those of us who love the Sumacs. The seeds persist into winter, as well as providing food for some species of birds.

The genus name comes from the Latin word for the species *R. coriaria*, Sicilian Sumac. Its family derivation is the Sumac family, Anacardiaceae. This family also includes Poison Ivy, Mango and Cashew. The toxin that gives us dermatitis from Poison Ivy is present in some of the other genera as well, which is why some folks are allergic to Mangoes. There are species of Sumac that have this toxin in abundance, and therefore should be avoided. Our plant however is completely safe.

Shining Sumac is a great pioneer plant in the succession of plant communities in a biome. Coming in after an area is disturbed, it thrives in compacted soils with poor fertility. Often seen along roads and highways, this plant will establish itself where others dare not tread. This tough plant is also drought and pollution tolerant and does great in restricted root zones (as in medians and parking lot dividers). This native of North America is one tough cookie.

It could be considered a small tree or large shrub, but it should be noted that it will sucker and colonize by underground adventitious runners. Not recommended for the small garden, the twelve to eighteen feet high by unlimited wide plant can be trained to a single stem, or allowed to grow as a multi-stemmed shrub. But do be prepared for some invasiveness.

In spring, the leaves emerge a shiny medium green. The summer finds the leaves expanding but retaining that nice sheen. This makes Shining Sumac one of the better choices for cultivation.

Late in summer, the flower spikes emerge to send forth the clusters of flowers, which in turn become the showy medium to dark red berries. The real treat for October and early November is the fall foliage color, which is a brilliant orange-red. This knockout coloration is especially nice when grown in full sun, although the plant will tolerate light shade. Full sun is also best for flower and seed-head production.

I pull the suckers growing out of the main plant, which I planted two years ago. It is now about eight feet tall and about six feet across. The image below doesn't do it a great deal of justice, but is only meant to lure you into a visit sometime during the next month.

Just as an aside, I would like to recommend a list of beautiful autumn color plants that might not come to you when thinking about the choice of a plant for the home garden.

Flowering Dogwoods should be considered, along with any of the Witch-hazel. Witch-hazel relatives that are nice include Parrotia, Fothergilla and Corylopsis. Stewartias are fabulous as well as the native Sourwood. I appreciate the subtle hues of Dawn-Redwood because it happens later, when other plants have already denuded themselves. Did I mention that we have all these plants here at the Gardens? I will write more about the fall coloration of plants and expand this list as the weeks move along. We will also have an open house and autumn festival sometime in October where we will give a special foliage tour to those who are interested. Or even to those who are not so long as they keep quiet.

Do stay dry over the next few days, and I'll be back next week. Until then, cheers to all.

Eric



*Foreground and right, you will see the shiny leaves and some of the flower clusters on our *Rhus copallina*. In the background is the 'widow's peak' of Marsh Hall, a great place to nosh a sandwich for lunch. The Copper Beech to the left has been struck by lightning, and like its brother not shown but close to Marsh Hall, its days are unfortunately numbered.*

Liquid Sunshine and Plant of the Week are written for e-mail readers on average of once a week. The opinions and views expressed therein are the sole responsibility of the author. Yale University and Marsh Botanical Garden are not responsible for the inane and sometimes off the chart craziness of this publication. Contact us at eric.larson@yale.edu or Marsh Botanical Garden, 165 Prospect Street, Room 114 OML, New Haven, CT 06511