DAKOTAFLORA

Skunkbrush

A TREAT MUCH TASTIER THAN IT SOUNDS

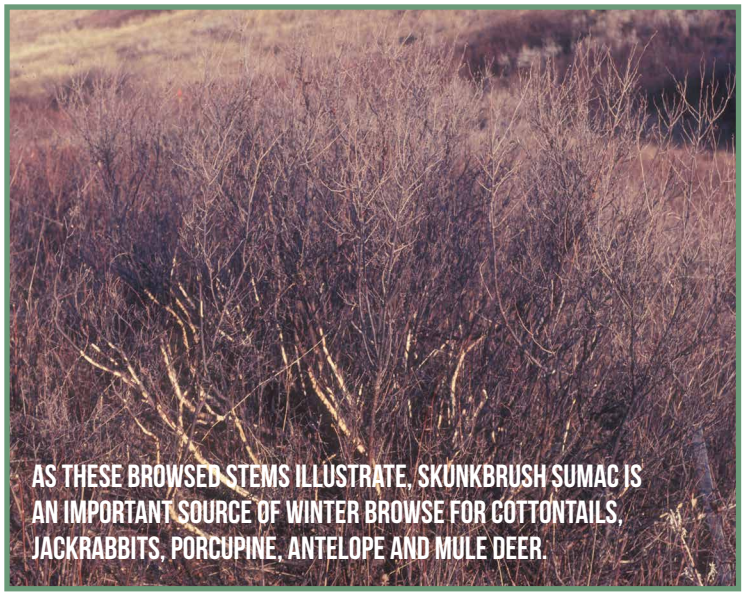
BY DAVE ODE, GFP BOTANIST

On October 1, 1804 Meriwether Lewis collected a specimen of a three-leaved sumac near the mouth of the Cheyenne River in central South Dakota. That fragmentary plant specimen #57 is still housed in the Lewis and Clark herbarium in the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the sumac still grows in the river breaks near the mouth of the Cheyenne. Whether Meriwether Lewis is the first to discover this plant depends on whether you are a lumper or a splitter. If you're a lumper, our plants are simply a variation of the wide-spread North American shrub *Rhus aromatic* (fragrant sumac) which extends from coast to coast and was first described in 1789 by William Aiton, the head gardener at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, England. If you are a splitter, Lewis did collect the first official specimen of *Rhus trilobata* which Thomas Nuttall named in his 1838 publication *Flora of North America*. While there is still some disagreement about the best taxonomic treatment for this variable shrub, the most recent version goes to the splitters who prefer an eastern element called *Rhus aromatic* and a western element called *Rhus trilobata*. Both these species are further divided into several taxonomic varieties.

Although botanists in the Dakotas typically call our shrub skunk "brush" sumac, it is most commonly called skunk "bush" sumac in other parts of the west. Other common names include lemonade sumac, stinking sumac, squawbush or polecat bush; and for the lumpers, the names fragrant or aromatic sumac cover all the various forms. When crushed, the leaves do have a notable citrusy aroma, not unpleasant to my nose (and nothing like a skunk), but apparently closer to the smell of turpentine to some people.

Skunkbrush sumac grows throughout the western two-thirds of South Dakota, and ranges westward to Alberta and California, south to Texas and Mexico. The eastern form grows from Quebec and Ontario south to Florida and westward to the eastern edge of the Great Plains. Both forms grow as a single tap-rooted, deciduous shrub or may form rhizomatous colonies. Some rhizomes have been excavated and measured in excess of 20 feet. The shrubs grow two to eight feet tall and are generally wider than tall. Colonies often live for 30 years or more. Small, yellow flowers are produced in early spring, either

BRIGHT RED FRUITS IN SUMMER AND BRIGHT RED FOLIAGE IN FALL MAKE SKUNKBRUSH SUMAC A PROMINENT SHRUB ON WESTERN LANDSCAPES.

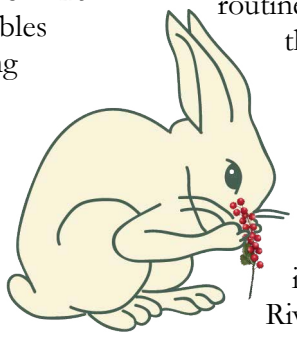


AS THESE BROWSED STEMS ILLUSTRATE, SKUNKBRUSH SUMAC IS AN IMPORTANT SOURCE OF WINTER BROWSE FOR COTTONTAILS, JACKRABBITS, PORCUPINE, ANTELOPE AND MULE DEER.

RIVER BREAKS IN WESTERN SOUTH DAKOTA OFTEN SUPPORT EXTENSIVE STANDS OF SKUNKBRUSH SUMAC.

before or with the emerging trifoliate compound leaves. Bright red fruits appear by mid-summer and the leaves begin turning from green to yellow to red in October.

At least four named cultivars have been selected from fragrant or skunkbrush sumac. "Konza" is a selection made by the federal Plant Materials Center in Manhattan, Kansas from plants collected in the Flint Hills region of eastern Kansas, likely attributables to the taxonomic variety *serotina*. In field testing across Oklahoma, Kansas and Nebraska, it proved superior in growth form, disease resistance and wildlife cover value. "Autumn Amber" and "Bighorn" are two cultivars released by the Plant Material Center at Los Lunas, New Mexico. Autumn Amber Creeping Sumac grows less than 18 inches tall but spreads six to eight feet wide providing a low ground cover with great fall colors. "Bighorn" skunkbush is widely used in the Rocky Mountain west in conservation and restoration plantings. "Gro-low Fragrant Sumac" is an ornamental selection by Synnesvedt Nursery of Glenville, Illinois from Chicago area plants that produce a low growing shrubby ground cover for use in the Midwest.



Whether wild or planted, skunkbrush sumac provides food and cover for a variety of wildlife. Flowers, fruits, buds and bark are browsed by elk, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, mule deer and white-tailed deer, jackrabbits, cottontails and porcupines. Its bright red fruits provide winter food for prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, ruffed grouse, sage grouse, wild turkeys, ring-necked pheasants and song birds like brown thrashers, mocking birds, bluebirds, flickers and robins. Skunkbrush sumac also provides nest sites for birds like field sparrows, gold finches, brown thrashers and catbirds.

Humans have also used skunkbrush sumac for many purposes dating back thousands of years. The online "Ethnobotany Database" contains no less than 181 different uses by Native Americans ranging from medicinal treatments of wounds and sores, to beverages, perfumes, prayer sticks and basket material. Ethnobotanist Vorsila L. Bohrer even documented how native people of the American southwest routinely burned *Rhus trilobata* to stimulate rapid regrowth that produces long, straight stems that can be woven into baskets or even children's toys like dolls and horses.

My own relationship with skunkbrush sumac is a lasting one. I have flushed prairie grouse, coyotes and mule deer from dense skunkbrush copses in the breaks of the Missouri, Cheyenne and Bad Rivers. I have planted them into soft Pierre shales that should not qualify as soil where the plants have survived and grown for decades. I have made tea from the berries, which is quite tasty when iced down and sweetened with honey. From my kitchen window I have watched brown thrashers and secretive blue grosbeaks dive for cover under the skunkbrush growing on the side-hill beside my house. I have watched mule deer fawns tentatively test the taste of skunkbrush winter buds.

Like other sumacs, skunkbrush has beautiful fall colors and with the new prostrate cultivars; it is even tame enough to use in manicured urban plantings. For conservation grade plant materials, the Big Sioux Nursery in Watertown maintains several beds of skunkbrush sumac available through our county conservation districts. In shelterbelt plantings, it is not as versatile as chokecherry's or plums, but in tough soils, droughty slopes or exposed outside tree rows, it is a tough survivor and a true North American original.