Species You Should Know
Poison Sumac, *Toxicodendron vernix*

Did you know that poison sumac is native to northeastern Illinois? Luckily, it is not a very common shrub but it can be found primarily in higher quality wetlands including marshes, swamps, bogs, fens, and soggy thickets along rivers. In contrast, most other species of sumac prefer well-drained soils.

This shrub is 10-25' tall, consisting of a trunk up to six inches across and a relatively open crown. It is characterized by:

- reddish stems
- leaves that consist of 7-13 leaflets arranged in pairs with a single leaflet at the end
- elongated leaflets with a smooth, velvety texture, smooth edges, and a V-shaped point
- bright orange leaves in the early spring that later become dark green and glossy, and then turn red-orange in the fall
- small, yellow-green flowers in clusters
- ivory-white to gray fruits that are loosely packed

Poison sumac is similar in appearance to true sumac (*Rhus* sp.), but its leaflets have smooth margins rather than toothed, and its drupes are white and glabrous rather than red and hairy. Poison sumac also superficially resembles a young Ash tree (*Fraxinus* sp.), but the latter has
opposite compound leaves and its fruit is a winged samara, rather than a drupe. Winged sumac (Rhus copallinum) looks similar to poison sumac, but is non-allergenic. Winged sumac can be distinguished from poison sumac by its 9-23 leaflets and red berries. The most widespread sumac, staghorn sumac, is non-poisonous. Staghorn sumac has bright orange or red berries growing at the edge of its stems. Its leaves also have saw-toothed edges, unlike poison sumac.

Like the more common Toxicodendron radicans (poison Ivy), all parts of this shrub exude a floral oil (uroshiol) that can irritate the skin of many individuals because its triggers an allergic reaction. While poison Ivy is normally a climbing woody vine with trifoliate leaves, poison sumac is an erect shrub that has compound leaves with 7-13 leaflets. Poison sumac prefers habitats that are more wet than those in which poison ivy occurs, and so these two species are rarely seen together.

For more information on this species, please contact trees@openlands.org.