

SUMAC THE SPICE

Sumacs are dioecious shrubs and small trees that can reach a height of 10 m. Sumacs propagate both by seed and by new shoots from rhizomes, forming large clonal colonies.

Some Middle Eastern markets stock sumac spices from over 150 varieties of sumac plants, including staghorn sumac, little leaf sumac, Sicilian sumac, winged sumac, and sourberry sumac. The two most common forms of cooking sumac, typically found in sumac spice blends, are:

Fragrant sumac (a.k.a. Lemon sumac)

Smooth sumac (a.k.a. Scarlet sumac)



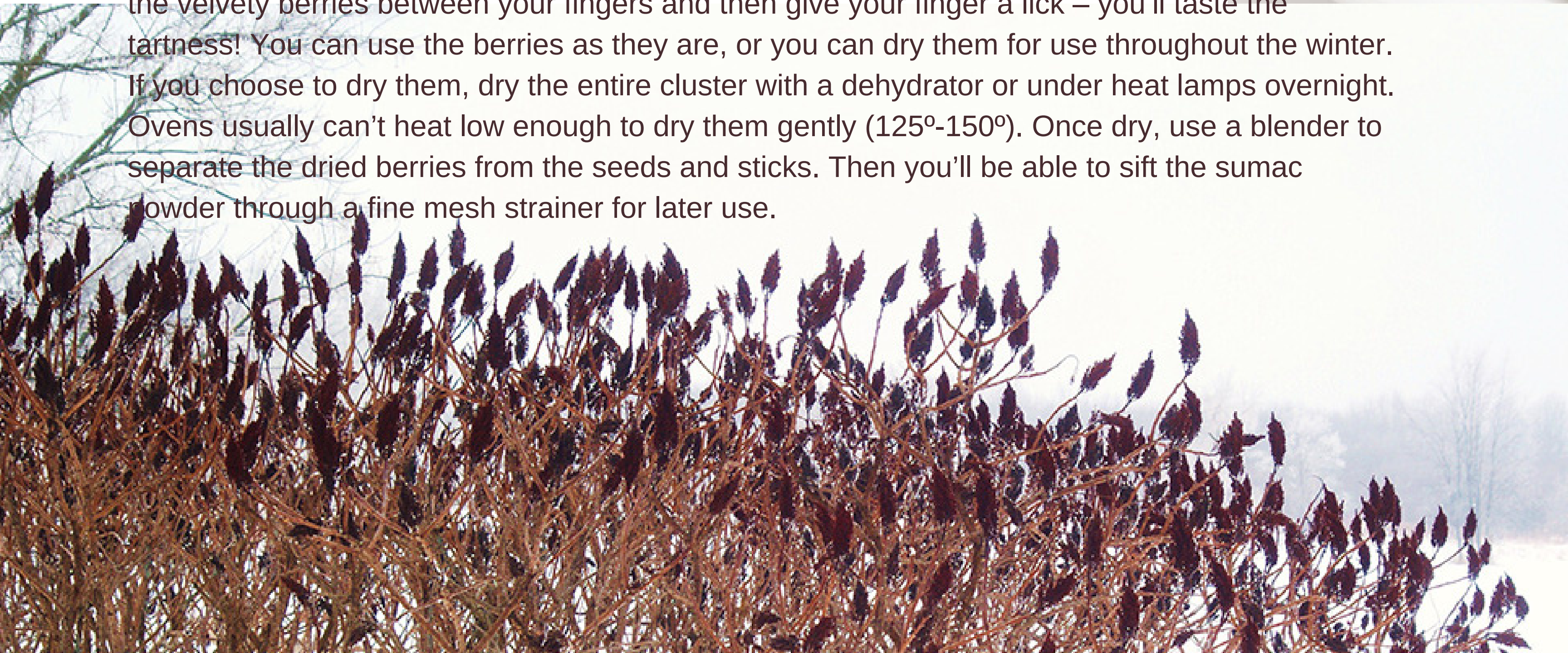
Although all sumac sold for consumption is safe to eat, there is also a poisonous form of the plant found in the wild, which is identifiable by its white berries and drooping leaves in contrast to edible sumac's bold red berries. These berries have a tart flavor that is reminiscent of lemons, but not as sour. In fact, before lemons were imported to Europe, the Romans used these berries to add a tangy taste to their meals. They are high in vitamins A, C, and antioxidants.

Sumac is used as a garnish on meze dishes such as hummus and tashi, it is also commonly added to falafel, salads rice and in the spice mixture za'atar. Fruits are also used to make a traditional "pink lemonade" beverage by steeping them in water, straining to remove the hairs that may irritate the mouth or throat, sometimes adding sweeteners such as honey or sugar.

Sumac was used as a treatment for several different ailments. Early pioneers treated coughs, sore throats and fevers with sumac, while American Indians used these berries to treat anything from reproductive problems to stomachaches and wounds.

Today, many Middle Eastern cultures still prefer sumac to lemons or vinegar. People keep it in shakers on the table to season their favorite foods in much the same way that we use salt or pepper.

To harvest the berries, simply cut the clusters, called "bobs" away from the trees. Roll a couple of the velvety berries between your fingers and then give your finger a lick – you'll taste the tartness! You can use the berries as they are, or you can dry them for use throughout the winter. If you choose to dry them, dry the entire cluster with a dehydrator or under heat lamps overnight. Ovens usually can't heat low enough to dry them gently (125°-150°). Once dry, use a blender to separate the dried berries from the seeds and sticks. Then you'll be able to sift the sumac powder through a fine mesh strainer for later use.



Sumac Herb Marinated Red Onions

Sumac Herb Marinated Red Onions get a hefty dose of fresh herbs and sumac for fresh citrusy flavor with a herby bite that makes a perfect condiment to so many dishes.

Ingredients

- 1 large red onion sliced
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon fresh sumac or 1 teaspoon dried sumac
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves or 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 teaspoons oregano leaves or 1/2 teaspoon dried

Instructions

1. In a small bowl combine vinegar and spices then stir in olive oil.
2. Slice onions and place in airtight storage container, or serving container if using immediately.
3. Pour marinade over onions, gently toss to coat and store refrigerated until ready to use, up to 7 days.

