

Rhus aromatica Aiton, SKUNKBRUSH, FRAGRANT SUMAC. Shrub, winter-deciduous, clump-forming, with long shoots and short lateral and spur shoots, 50–200 cm tall; shoots short-tomentose, strongly aromatic like wintergreen (*Gaultheria*) when cut or crushed (having resin ducts with terpenes); bark tight, light gray, ± smooth. **Stems:** cylindric, when young typically < 4 mm diameter, limber, reddish, puberulent on young periderm, knobby at nodes from persistent, short-projecting bases of old petioles (1 mm); containing colorless resin from ducts in stem. **Leaves:** helically alternate, 3-foliolate, typically 30–50 mm long, petiolate with the 3 leaflets subsessile to sessile arising at same point, without stipules; petiole 5–15 mm long; blades of leaflets ovate to obovate or fan-shaped to rhombic, 5–28 × 5–26 mm, terminal leaflet > lateral leaflets, rounded or obtuse (lateral leaflets) to tapered (terminal leaflets) at base, shallowly to deeply 3-lobed and short-crenate, pinnately veined with principal veins slightly raised on lower surface. **Inflorescence:** panicle of racemes, on spur shoots clustered at tips of winter stems, racemes often 3, 10–15 mm long, each raceme ± 20-flowered, flowers helically arranged and tightly clustered, buds formed in midsummer and flowering starting before leaves, bracteate, densely short-tomentose with brown hairs; peduncle to 5 mm long; bract subtending each branch deltate-broadly awl-shaped and cupped, 1–2 mm long, brownish red, stiff, short-tomentose especially below midpoint, persistent; axes stiff, short-hairy; bractlets subtending pedicel 2, partially hidden by and ⊥ to bract, ovate, 1 mm long, keeled, puberulent at base and on inner surface; pedicel 1–2 mm long increasing in fruit, greenish, sparsely hairy or glabrous. **Flower:** bisexual, radial, 3–4 mm across; **calyx** 5(–6)-lobed, fused at base; lobes cupped-ovate, ca. 1.3 mm long, green with membranous margins, margins aging rose; **petals** 5(–6), broadly elliptic to ovate, 2.3–2.5 mm long, center greenish yellow with pale yellow margins, upper (inner) surface short-pilose with raised midvein, lower (outer) surface glabrous; **stamens** 5, free; filaments 0.8–1 mm long, colorless, arching inward; anthers dorsifixed, dithecal, cordate-rectangular, 0.5 mm long, greenish, longitudinally dehiscent; pollen colorless; **nectary disc** surrounding pistil, ringlike, 2 mm diameter, with 5 notched lobes, yellowish, producing copious nectar around bases of petals and stamens; **pistil** 1, < 1 mm long; ovary superior, conic, green, short glandular-puberulent, 1-chambered with 3 ovules; styles 3, spreading, colorless; stigmas 3, club-shaped. **Fruit:** drupelike, fleshy, with 1 stone, strongly aromatic, widely depressed-ellipsoid, 5–6 × 7 × 4 mm, bright red-orange to orangish or yellowish, pilose and viscid with glandular hairs; outer fruit (exocarp) tough; pulp (mesocarp) thin; stone (endocarp) separating easily from mesocarp, discoid-ellipsoid, 5 × 6.5 mm, pale orange; 5-lobed calyx persistent with lobes appressed to fruit. Early March–late April.

Native. Shrub occurring occasionally in the zone between chaparral and southern oak woodland, e.g., at SMMNRA Paramount Ranch and along the trail to the M.A.S.H. site from Crags Drive, Malibu Creek State Park. *Rhus aromatica* formerly was treated in California as *R. trilobata*, and under that scheme our populations fit subsp. *pilosissima*. This sumac is widely distributed across North America and has 3-parted leaves that are very similar to those of poison oak, *Toxicodendron diversilobum*, which belongs to the same family. However, it is not advisable to crush the leaves before knowing the exact identity, but skunkbush is aromatic like oil of wintergreen. Its flowers open in March,

from buds preformed during the previous summer, forming tight clusters of yellow flowers before the leaves expand.

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