

## Sweet Tupelo Tree

By Susan Camp

Last night, as I was deleting photos from my smartphone, I found one that I had taken late last summer of a branch on one of our four black tupelo trees. The photo angle isn't great; the lighting is poor; the leaves are insect-eaten. I had snapped the photo for a friend who was trying to identify one of her trees, so I wasn't aiming for an artistic touch. I realized, though that black tupelo, or black gum, is my favorite tree.

Black tupelo, of the lyrical formal name *Nyssa sylvatica*, is native to eastern North America, thriving in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 through 9. This medium-sized shade tree is a member of the dogwood family, and not related to sweetgum (*Liquidambar* spp.). The name tupelo is taken from Native American Creek words meaning "swamp tree." The descriptive term "black" is used to differentiate *N. sylvatica* from its cousin, *N. ogeche*, or white tupelo, popular with bees from South Carolina to Florida, who produce from it what is claimed to be the world's finest honey. White tupelo honey must be good; it prompted Van Morrison to write a great song.

Black tupelo prefers full sun or part shade and moist, deep, well-drained, acidic soil. It will tolerate standing water and will adapt to drought conditions. Black tupelo will not thrive in the polluted air of an urban environment.

The slow-growing *N. sylvatica* reaches a mature height of 40 to 60 feet with a spread of 20 to 30 feet. Pyramidal in shape when young, black tupelo develops a tall, straight trunk with branches that reach out at 90 degree angles. Some branches develop quirky characteristics, twisting and meandering nearly to the ground. The tree needs plenty of room to spread, and because of its deep taproot, it is difficult to transplant.

The dark gray bark is flaky on the young tree, but, at maturity, develops into furrowed, blocky patterns resembling alligator hide. The heavy, pale yellow wood is heavy, strong, and difficult to split. The tough wood is used for mauls, pulleys, pallets, rough flooring, and pulpwood. Large limbs deteriorate easily, providing nesting space for birds, squirrels, raccoons, and opossums.

Some black gums are dioecious, meaning a male and female tree must be planted near each other, in order to produce flowers. Others have both male and female flowers on the same tree. The white to pale-green, nondescript flowers appear in May and June. The blossoms provide an excellent source of nectar for bees. Decayed sections of black gum trunks were used as "bee gums" or natural beehives.

The fleshy fruit, an ovoid, sour-tasting, dark-blue drupe, appears in October, before fruit appears on many other trees. One to three drupes develop on each flower stalk. Black tupelo fruit is a significant food source for many birds, including the American robin, blue jay, eastern bluebird, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, and American crow.

The two-to-five inch oval or elliptical black tupelo leaves are a rich, glossy green in summer, but the real treat comes when the evening temperatures begin to drop in the fall. The autumn show of *Nyssa sylvatica* displays, in my opinion, the most glorious presentation of all the deciduous trees in our region. Shades of bright scarlet, yellow, orange, and purple intermingle on the tree. After the leaves drop, the graceful, intricately branching tree structure provides striking interest against the winter sky.

The Arbor Day Foundation Tree Guide entry “Black Tupelo: *Nyssa sylvatica*”; Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Nyssa sylvatica*”; and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service article “*Nyssa sylvatica*” all contain information on growing this lovely tree.

It isn't time to plant a new tree, but it is never too early to plan for next winter. If you have a sunny, open area that cries out for a medium-sized shade tree that will attract bees, birds, and other wildlife, and provide you with the best fall leaf show ever, consider planting a black tupelo.

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