

Sourwood

Oxydendrum arboreum (L) D.C.

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The sourwood is an all-round favorite because of its all-season natural beauty. Also known as the Sorrel tree, Sour gum, and Lily-of-the-valley, it usually grows about 25 feet tall with a trunk of approximately 8 inches in diameter. In the wild it sometimes grows much larger, reaching 50-60 feet in height and as much as 20 inches in diameter. The trunk is usually straight, slender, and bears a narrow-topped crown.

It is usually found growing as an occasional tree in mixed hardwood stands on moist hillsides, ridges, and gentle mountain slopes. It is also used as an ornamental because of its beautiful flowers and bright fall foliage. The sourwood is a very slow grower.

Bark on the sourwood is rather thick, roughened by fissures separating rounded ridges covered with thin scales. It develops a blocky, alligator appearance similar to persimmon or flowering dogwood. The bark of old trunks is grayish tinged with red and resembles that of a black gum. Twigs are slender, first yellowish-green, later orange-colored, and then reddish-brown. Lenticels are numerous, oblong, and elevated.

The leaves are deciduous, alternate, elliptic, and pointed at both ends. They are thin, toothed, smooth, light green, 5-7



inches long, and resemble a peach leaf. In the autumn they change to a brilliant bright rich maroon, scarlet, or plum color. This tree grows in full sun to partial shade. The more sun it receives improves both fall color and flower bloom. When crushed the stem and leaf have a sour smell.

Flowers on the sourwood are white, fragrant, urn-shaped, in racemes, 6-8 inches long opening downward, one-sided, similar to the lily-of-the-valley flower. It blooms usually in mid-July. The

fruit is a 5-halved capsule, opening upward. The seeds are slender with awl-shaped appendages.

The trees are very decorative at any season with flowers, fruit, and foliage. The plume-like blossoms are attractive to bees and provide the choicest honey to be found anywhere.

The wood is hard, heavy, compact, and reddish-brown with lighter-colored sapwood. Historically the wood was used for making tool handles. The trunks of smaller trees were used for the runners of mule-drawn sleds in the Appalachians before wagon roads were built. Today it is used for pulpwood and firewood. Mountain folk make a black dye from the leaves.

The sourwood is well distributed over the entire state of Alabama, from north Florida to Louisiana, and north to Indiana and Pennsylvania.

The Alabama champion sourwood is located in Coosa County. It has a circumference of 70.5 inches, a height of 73 feet, and a crown spread of 40.7 feet for a total point value of 153.68. Amelia County in Virginia is the home of the national champion. It is 132 inches in circumference, 95 feet high with a crown of 70 feet for a total point value of 245. 🌳



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