

Sweetleaf

Symplocos tinctoria

By *Fred Nation*, Educator, Baldwin County

Sweetleaf is a semi-evergreen shrub or small tree that occurs in the understory of mixed hardwood forests in the southeast, from Delaware, through northern Florida, to east Texas. In Alabama it can be found on moist wooded sites and along stream banks throughout the state. Another frequently heard common name is “horse-sugar,” a reference to the sweet-tasting leaves, which are eagerly browsed by whitetail deer, cattle, and horses.

The leaves are simple, alternate, somewhat leathery, to about six inches long, with pointed tips. Leaf margins are entire, or sometimes with a few small, blunt teeth. During the growing season the bright yellow midveins on fully developed leaves can be used as a field-mark to quickly distinguish sweetleaf from persimmon, hollies, and other species with similar leaves. The bark is thin, gray, initially smooth, eventually developing long, shallow, vertical splits on large stems.

Flowers, developing in the early spring before the new leaves emerge, are



small, slightly fragrant, creamy yellow, in dense showy clusters on twigs of the previous season. Fruits are oblong, green, one-seeded drupes, about one half inch long, becoming dry and dark brown or black when ripe. The flowers provide an early nectar source for butterflies, and the leaves are a larval host for the promethia moth, one of our largest and most spectacular moths.

The species technical name, *tinctoria*, from the Latin, means “used as a dye.” In colonial and early American times, the leaves and twigs of *Symplocos tinctoria* were boiled to obtain a beautiful yellowish-green fabric and yarn dye. This use explains another folk name, “dyebush,” which is sometimes seen in old references. The bark and bitter, aromatic root were sparingly used medicinally in colonial times as a tonic to reduce fevers.

The small habit, nearly evergreen foliage, shade tolerance, and handsome early spring flowers are desirable characteristics that would make our native sweetleaf a desirable ornamental landscape tree. Unfortunately, it is difficult to reliably propagate from stem cuttings or from seeds, and is very seldom seen in the nursery trade. The Alabama State Champion *Symplocos tinctoria* is 34 inches in circumference, 50 feet tall, with an average crownspread of 22 feet, found in Marion County. 🌳



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