



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Sweetgum

(*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Sweetgum, also known as redgum, is a large, well-formed canopy tree, frequently to 80 feet tall, with a straight trunk to 2 feet or more in diameter. The crown is conical, broadening with age. Many of the twigs and small branches develop distinctive corky ridges that give them a winged appearance. The bark on mature trees is gray, vertically furrowed, with long narrow ridges.

The leaves are alternate, star-shaped, 3 to 5 inches across, with five (occasionally seven) finely serrate, sharply pointed lobes. When bruised or crushed, the leaves and branches are aromatic, with a fragrance that most people find pleasant. Since the earliest pioneer days the sweet, aromatic resin has been collected, mostly by children, and used as “chewing gum.” The fragrant resin of a Mediterranean sweetgum species, *L. orientalis*, has been collected for centuries and sold as “storax” for use as incense, medicines, and as a fragrance in the perfume industry.

The fall foliage is among the most spectacular of any North American tree, with brilliant yellows, reds, and purples that vary from tree to tree, and year to year, depending on growing conditions. Sweetgums are often confused with maples because both share similar, palmately-lobed foliage. They can easily be distinguished, however, with a quick look

at the twigs and leaves, which are alternate on sweetgum, and opposite on maples. The leaves are a larval host for the pale green luna moth, one of our largest and most beautiful insects.

The fruits are woody capsules, fused into hard, spiny balls about 2 inches across. They are produced in great numbers and they are persistent, falling from the trees over a long period from fall into the following summer. Anyone who has stepped barefoot on one of those prickly balls will quickly become aware of one of the objections to sweetgum as a lawn or landscape tree! Another “weedy” characteristic is the production of root sprouts, which often pop-up and grow very quickly in lawns and flower beds. It will often aggressively “pioneer” cleared land, and sometimes appears as a weed species in competition with planted pine trees.

Sweetgum is the only species in the genus *Liquidambar* in North America, but it is quite successful and has a large range, from Connecticut south to central Florida, west to eastern Texas, and north to Illinois and Ohio. In Alabama it is found throughout the state in nearly every habitat, but it attains its best growth in moist, rich alluvial soils. Sweetgum is an important hardwood timber

species. It is used for cabinetry and furniture, crates, plywood, veneer, and for pulpwood. The wood is heavy, moderately hard, and takes stain quite well. On the other hand, sawed boards tend to warp as they dry, and the wood is not durable for outdoor use.

More than most of our native trees, sweetgum has defenders and detractors, with good cases to be made on both sides. But the brilliant red, yellow, purple, and crimson colors of a tall, stately sweetgum tree in its fall glory are elegant statements in favor of its use as an ornamental in the right settings in our parks and landscapes. The Alabama State Champion *Liquidambar styraciflua* is 75 feet tall, with a trunk circumference of 161 inches and a crown spread of 66 feet. This forest giant is growing in Coosa County. 🌳

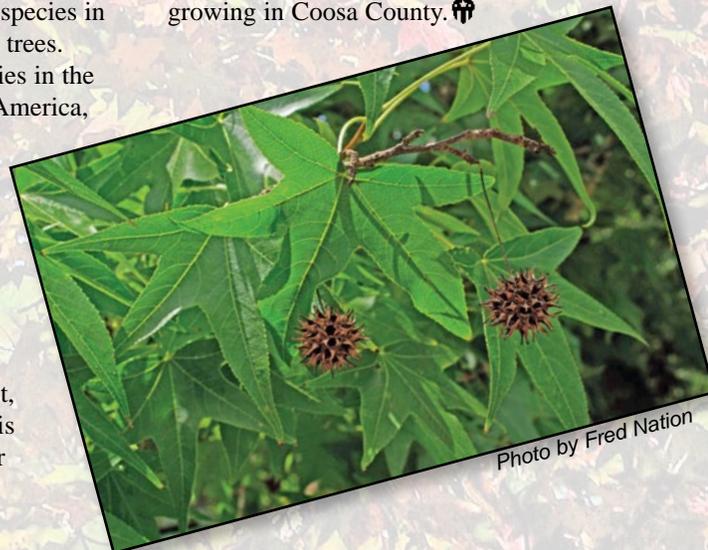


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