



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
513 Madison Avenue
P.O. Box 302550
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-2550

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

PRESORTED
STANDARD
U.S. POSTAGE PAID
MONTGOMERY AL
PERMIT NO 109



Sweetbay Magnolia

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Sweetbay was the first American magnolia to be exported to Europe, dating from 1688 in England. The tall, straight habit; attractive evergreen foliage with contrasting colors; handsome, fragrant flowers and red seed cones have made sweetbay a popular landscape tree on both sides of the Atlantic for more than 300 years.

Magnolia virginiana is a medium to large tree that is frequently seen in swamps, pine flatwoods, flood plains, and on stream and river banks throughout most of Alabama. It has the largest distribution of the eight native American magnolia species. The range is from Long Island, down the Atlantic coastal plain, through Florida; west through the Gulf Coast states to southeast Texas. A deciduous, multi-stem, shrubby form occurs in northern parts of the range, but in Alabama our sweetbays are the arborescent form that matures into stately canopy trees.

The leaves are evergreen or nearly so, alternate, elliptical, without teeth, up to about 8 inches long, 2 inches wide. Upper surfaces are dull green, hairless; the distinctive undersides are usually finely hairy, chalky or pale bluish white. The bark is smooth, gray-brown; on old trees developing a gravelly texture, with shallow, irregular vertical furrows. All parts of the trees, including the bark and foliage, are aromatic, with a pleasant spicy fragrance.

May to June, sweetbay flowers are fragrant, to about 4 inches across, with 8 to 12 creamy white petals (tepals). The fruits are pink or red, cone-like, developing in the centers of the flowers. The seeds, with fleshy, bright red or orange coverings, ripen and

drop from the fruits in the fall. They are avidly foraged by birds and squirrels, who contribute to dispersal strategies by transporting and dropping the seeds over wide areas, often some distance from the parent trees. Though it is a wetland species, once established, sweetbay is tolerant of the drier conditions found in most landscapes.

Medicinal applications of sweetbay and other American magnolias were well established by Eastern American Indian tribes when the first Europeans arrived. From the

Indians they learned the uses of sweetbay for treatments of rheumatism, fevers, coughs, and eventually malaria, which was a 16th century introduction to the New World. Magnolia bark extract and capsules are still sold as dietary supplements to treat colds and other bronchial problems.

The Alabama State Champion *Magnolia virginiana* is 11.5 feet in circumference, 98 feet tall, with a crown spread of 53 feet. This forest giant can be seen at Historic Blakeley State Park in Baldwin County. ♣



Photos by Fred Nation