

Sweetgum

Liquidambar styraciflua



PHOTO BY BRENT HOLUBEC



As one of the most common hardwoods in southern forests, sun-loving sweetgum provides shade for smaller understory plants and animals, while its leaves provide brilliant fall colors. It occurs naturally in the East Texas Pineywoods ecosystem, but has been introduced as a landscape tree in other parts of the state.

Northern Pineywoods

Sweetgum

Liquidambar styraciflua



APPEARANCE

Height: 80 to 120 feet (24 to 36 m)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Star-shaped leaf with 5 to 7 lobes
- Dark green in spring and summer
- Brilliant gold and orange in autumn
- Thick, gray-brown, deeply furrowed bark
- Conical shape in young trees and oval shape in mature trees

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Texas east to Florida and north to New York

Growth habit: Early growth is very rapid, but the tree often falls behind other species after maturity.

Flowers: March through May; very small green blossoms

Fruit: Fruit are shaped like horny globes. At least 25 species of birds, various squirrels and chipmunks eat the fruit.

Seeds: Trees begin to produce seeds after 20 or 30 years and continue to bear seeds until about 150 years old. Seed balls, under the best conditions, may hold up to 56 seeds. Sweetgum stumps and roots sprout easily, especially after the stem is killed, cut or heavily damaged.

HABITAT

Sweetgum are found in bottomland hardwood and *riparian* (streamside) areas. Although it prefers moist soil, it is extremely adaptable and will grow in dryer areas.

SWEETGUM AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The genus, *Liquidambar*, can be found here and there all over the Northern Hemisphere. There are more than 20 species of sweetgum identified. A *Liquidambar* fossil found in Greenland is more than 55 million years old. Sweetgum often grow in mixed stands with maple, box elder, and pine trees. Because sweetgum is a fast growing, fairly disease resistant species, it adapts well to areas that have been disturbed and is sometimes used in reforestation projects.

SWEETGUM AND PEOPLE

Native Americans used to chew the hardened resin from the bark of sweetgum trees obtained by peeling the bark and scraping off the resin-like solid. This gum was used medicinally as well as for chewing gum. They also made various teas and medicines to treat dysentery and diarrhea from bark and roots of sweetgum. It is reported to be excellent for healing wounds.

The wood of the sweetgum is second only to oak in being used for furniture, wooden boxes, musical instruments, flooring, and composite products. It has been cultivated in North America since the 1680s.