Nyssa sylvatica - Black Tupelo, Black Gum or Sour Gum (Nyssaceae)

Nyssa sylvatica is a shade tree with shining dark green summer foliage, excellent autumn color, abundant fruits (on appropriate flowering forms) that attract wildlife, and a picturesque growth habit with blocky ornamental bark at maturity. Black Tupelo is a native shade tree that is underutilized in landscapes, and is primarily known for its spectacular autumn colors.

FEATURES

Form
-large shade tree
-maturing at 40' tall x 30' wide under urban conditions, but double that in the wild
-upright pyramidal growth habit in youth, becoming upright oval, upright horizontal, or spreading with age (often quite unpredictable in the growth habit of an individual tree)
-slow growth rate under urban conditions, but medium growth rate in native sites

Culture
-full sun to partial sun (partial shade tolerant in youth)
-performs best in evenly moist, deep, acidic soils, but is somewhat adaptable to either wet or dry soils though it cannot be considered urban tolerant
-propagated primarily by seeds, but stem cuttings from male trees are sometimes grafted onto seedling understock
-Tupelo Family, with occasional leaf spot being the most common cosmetic disease; in general, no disease or pest problems of significance
-moderately available in B&B or container form
-alkaline pH soils should be avoided, as they cause slow growth, foliage chlorosis, and eventual decline or demise of the tree
-the deep taproot system makes B&B transplanting somewhat risky except on very young trees, and therefore container-grown saplings are becoming more popular

Foliage
-alternate, obovate to elliptic, and lustrous dark green in summer
-excellent autumn color, a mixture of scarlet, purple, orange, yellow, and green hues of shining foliage on the tree in autumn, slowly abscising

Flowers
-polygam dioecious (most trees have either staminate flowers [male, non-fruiting trees] or pistillate flowers [female, heavy fruiting trees], but some trees have either staminate and perfect flowers [limited-fruiting trees] or pistillate and perfect flowers [heavy fruiting trees])
- whatever the floral state of the tree, the flowers are small, greenish-white, and ornamentally insignificant, appearing in May with the foliage

Fruits
-bluish-black small oblong fruits, maturing in Sept. and Oct., often profusely borne when present, and readily eaten by birds and squirrels
-the abscised fleshy fruits (or directly correlated bird droppings under the trees) can be a liability

Twigs
-reddish brown young twigs become a smooth light gray by the second season
-branches become densely twiggy with age and have numerous spur shoots

Trunk
-brown to dark gray, with prominent ridges broken into rectangular blocks by horizontal fissures, somewhat ornamental and eventually becoming platy with age

USAGE

Function
-specimen, focal point, or shade tree

Texture
-medium-fine texture in foliage and when bare

Assets
-consistently spectacular autumn color
-fruits attract wildlife (for those trees that have fruits)
-wet site or dry site tolerant
-blocky ornamental mature bark
-some trees have picturesque horizontal branching and a flat-topped crown with age

Liabilities
-fruit litter and associated bird droppings (for those trees that have fruits)
-slow growth rate in most urban situations
-irregular growth habit for some individual trees

Habitat
-Zones 3 to 9
-Native to the Eastern U.S.

SELECTIONS

Alternates
-shade trees for excellent autumn color (Acer rubrum, Acer saccharum, Liquidambar styraciflua, Quercus coccinea, etc.)
-trees with abundant fruits that attract wildlife (Amelanchier, Carya, Crataegus, Fagus, Malus, Morus, Quercus, etc.)
-trees with a flat-topped growth habit at maturity (Crataegus crusgalli, Gleditsia triacanthos [native thorny form], etc.)

Cultivars – Variants – Related species
-the straight species is usually the only available choice, although selections should be made for forms that are alkaline soil tolerant, single color autumn color, or male (fruitless) grafted forms