

# *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.

## Form

-large shade tree



## FEATURES

-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)

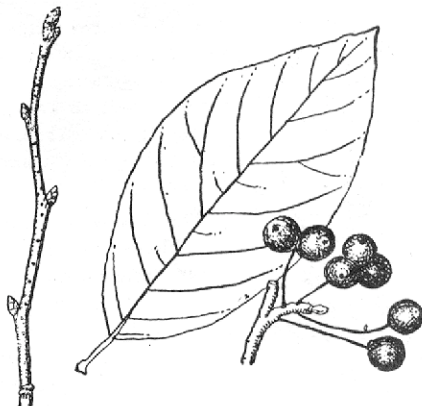
-slow growth rate under urban conditions, but medium growth rate in native sites

## 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

-polygamo-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  
 -average to thick density 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