



Nyssa sylvatica Blackgum¹

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

INTRODUCTION

Sourgum is a hardwood tree which grows to 75 feet tall, has a medium growth rate, pyramidal shape with horizontal branches growing from a typically straight trunk (Fig. 1). But the shape of the crown varies from tree to tree and, unfortunately, this is looked upon by some architects as undesirable. As the tree grows to 10 and 15-years-old, crown form becomes more uniform among trees. Lower branches droop with age and will need to be removed if used as a street tree. Growth habit is similar to pin oak, a tree which many people are familiar with. Providing a brilliant display of red to deep purple foliage in the fall, Sourgum surprises most people since it does not particularly stand out in the landscape until then. The small, blue fruits may be considered a litter nuisance in urban/suburban plantings but are quite popular with many birds and mammals, and they wash away quickly.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Nyssa sylvatica*

Pronunciation: NISS-uh sill-VAT-ih-kuh

Common name(s): Blackgum, Sourgum, Black Tupelo

Family: *Nyssaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 4B through 9 (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Uses: large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or

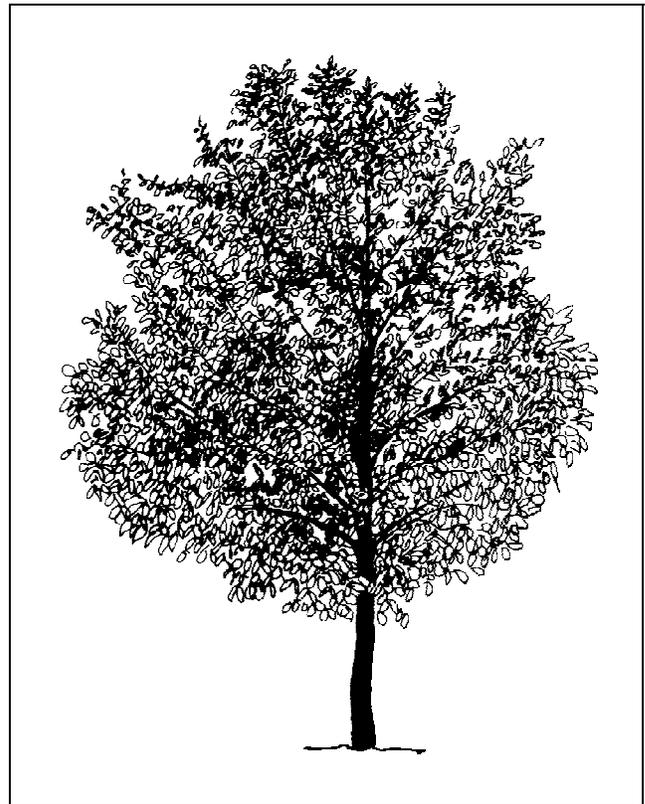


Figure 1. Young Blackgum.

for median strip plantings in the highway; reclamation plant; shade tree; specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree; no proven urban tolerance
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

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2. Edward F. Gilman, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 65 to 75 feet
Spread: 25 to 35 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms
Crown shape: oval; pyramidal
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: slow
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval); oblong
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: orange; red
Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristics: inconspicuous and not showy; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval; round
Fruit length: < .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: blue
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; attracts squirrels and other mammals; inconspicuous and not showy; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; not particularly showy; should be grown with a single leader; no thorns
Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: brown; gray

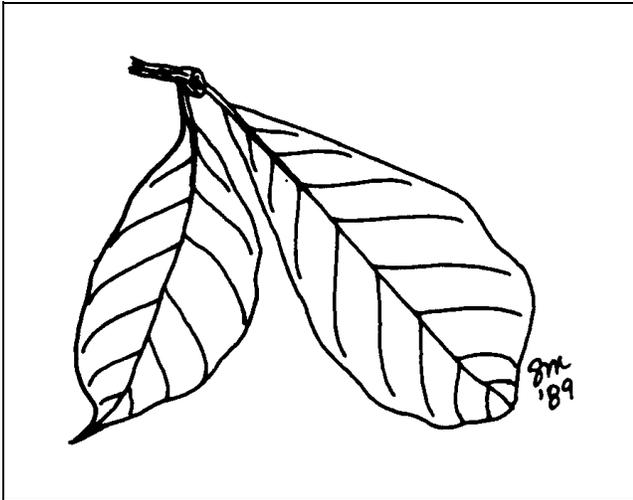


Figure 3. Foliage of Blackgum.

Current year twig thickness: medium; thin

Wood specific gravity: 0.50

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Soil salt tolerance: good

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Ozone sensitivity: tolerant

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible

Pest resistance: no pests are normally seen on the tree

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Sourgum prefers a moist, slightly acid soil. Larger specimens may be difficult to transplant from deep, well-drained field soil because of its deep roots and should only be transplanted from the field in the spring. Therefore, it is usually seen growing in containers at the nursery. Little pruning is required to form a well-structured tree since the trunk stays straight and branches usually grow at wide angles with

the trunk. Sourgum makes a good street or parking lot tree for suburban neighborhoods, possibly for downtown areas. It should be used more often for this purpose but will benefit from occasional irrigation in droughts. Does amazingly well in wet, compacted soils typical of many urban areas with highly disturbed clay soil. It is also somewhat salt-tolerant for planting along the shore.

Sourgum is rarely attacked by pests, and when it is they are rarely serious enough to warrant control.

Nyssa sylvatica var. *sylvatica* grows on moist sites; var. *aquatica* has a buttressed and swollen trunk base and grows in swamps. *Nyssa bicolor* is very similar and often confused with *Nyssa sylvatica*.

Pests

Scales, including Sourgum scale, can be controlled with horticultural oil.

Forest tent caterpillar can defoliate the tree in the spring. Unless defoliation is extensive in two or more successive years, control is not needed.

Diseases

Several fungi cause cankers on Sourgum. As the cankers enlarge the infected stems die back. Trunk cankers cause tree dieback. Prune out infected branches and keep trees healthy.

Leaf spots cause purplish blotches on the upper leaf surface. Rake up and destroy infected leaves in the fall to reduce the disease potential for the following year, if you wish.

Recently a large number of trees have been discovered dying in the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia. The causal agent is unknown but symptoms include leaf spots, branch cankers, leaves dying and hanging on the tree, and leaf blotches.