



Photo by Paul Rites, ODF

Black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) is a good fall color choice

Jeri Chase, ODF Agency Affairs Specialist

We always think of spring as the time to plant, but, when it comes to what's best for trees, fall is also a good time of year, giving roots time to establish and settle in before the spring growing season. Fall is also a great time to observe which trees come into their own this time of year; one of those is black gum.

Known by many other names – including the Tupelo, sour gum and Pepperidge – the deciduous black gum fairly glows this time of year with brilliant scarlet color, and its thin, translucent leaves allow the lovely fall light to shine right through them.

Native to the eastern United States, this is a medium to large tree that grows at a medium rate to attain 60-80 feet. A long-lived shade tree, it's not bothered much by pests and disease. It thrives in sun or partial shade – as long as there is some protection from cold, dry winds, and moist, well-drained soil. And, it's a hardy tree that does best in areas with hot, dry summers.

In habit, the black gum has a straight trunk and conical crown – pyramidal when young and opening with age, with branches extending at right angles. The bark is reddish-brown to grey, aging into deep irregular ridges and diamond-shaped plates reminiscent of alligator hide.

Displays color early

The black gum has dense foliage, with lustrous, glossy deep emerald two-to-five-inch leaves throughout the summer, making it an excellent shade tree. It is one of the first trees to display color in early fall – with leaves first changing to deep purple and then turning yellow, orange, bright red, and scarlet – sometimes all colors on a single branch.

Birds, bees, wildlife

This is an excellent tree for urban wildlife. Small greenish-white flowers – borne singly or in clusters – spear in early spring and provide nectar for honeybees – producing the famous tupelo honey. The small blue-black berries that follow in the summer are prized by many species of birds, and the shelter that the deteriorating branches and even trunk areas provide habitat for cavity nesters and other wildlife.

It is a versatile tree – looking equally as good as a single, ornamental, specimen tree, or blending well into a more native landscape.

Although black gum can be rare to find in nurseries, it's well worth the search. 