

Black Gum

A tall tree with horizontal branches and a flat-topped crown. Young trees are pyramidal; older trees more oval.

Leaves alternate, simple, oval-elliptical and lack teeth. In summer they are shiny dark green above and downy below. Often crowded toward the tips of branches. Early color changers, they turn bright scarlet or purple in late summer, well before the first frost.

Bark gray to brown or black, deeply grooved, with ridges broken into irregularly shaped blocks with an "alligator hide" appearance.

Twigs slender, reddish-brown, slightly hairy at first, becoming gray and smooth later; some twigs short, pointed; pith white, with chambers.

Flowers April-June, as the leaves unfold. Male and female flowers greenish, in clusters on separate trees; petals 5, small.

Fruits September-October; plumlike, bluish-black with a whitish coating, about ½ inch long, egg-shaped, thin-fleshed, with a single seed or pit. Pit flattened, with 10-12 broad, rounded ribs.

Size:

Height: to 100 feet.

Habitat and conservation:

Occurs in acid soils overlying sandstone, chert or igneous substrate of dry, rocky, wooded slopes, ridges, ravines, borders of sinkhole ponds in the Ozarks, and lowland forests in southeastern Missouri. It tolerates shade and is frequently found growing with or under oaks and pines.

Distribution in Missouri:

Mostly in the Bootheel and in the southeastern Ozarks, though it has become popular in landscaping throughout the state.

Status:

Also called sour gum and black tupelo. This tree has been in cultivation since 1750; its brilliant foliage makes it a popular ornamental. If you are considering planting it, be glad, for it is essentially pest-free; the few pests that attack it are not serious. It's slow to become established after transplanting, so after-planting care is important. Once established, trees require little care besides watering during drought. It also tolerates urban growing conditions.

Human connections:

Black gum is becoming a popular landscaping tree. It offers an impressive scarlet fall color and lacks the spiny balls of the unrelated sweet gum. The wood is used for veneer, plywood, boxes, pulp, tool handles, gunstocks, docks and wharves. Bees make good honey from black gum blossoms.

Ecosystem connections:

Many animals eat the fruit: birds, small rodents, opossum, raccoon, foxes, deer, and black bear. The latter two also browse the foliage. Large trees, in life and in death, provide habitat and/or nesting sites for many birds, mammals, amphibians, reptiles, insects, fungi and more.

