

Nyssa sylvatica (Blackgum) Tupelo Family (Nyssaceae)

Introduction:

From waxy spring foliage and brilliant fall color to beautiful winter form, the blackgum shows great ornamental value. It has unique, very thick bark that is arranged in characteristic six-sided plates. It is striking throughout the year, particularly in winter when its unique branching can be fully appreciated. Unlike most broadleaf trees, the blackgum's branches grow at right angles from the trunk. Drooping with age, the graceful branches add to the distinct form and beauty of this tree.

Culture:

This beautiful tree can be used as a shade or ornamental tree in a variety of soil types and climates. Although it performs best on moist, acidic soil, it adapts to extreme climates and is resistant to drought and flood damage. Blackgum will not tolerate alkaline soil and may suffer damage from pollution. Although it will grow in full and partial sun, fall color is enhanced by sunny conditions. Blackgum has few disease problems. The tree has a sensitive root system that requires its being transplanted in spring with a slightly oversized soil ball.

Cultivars:

Because blackgum is difficult to propagate vegetatively, few selections have been made. Because provenance has an effect on fall color display, it is recommended a colorful seedling tree from a local source be chosen.

Additional information:

Of the Nyssaceae family, only the genus *Nyssa* is native to North America. Fossils of *Nyssa*'s characteristic ribbed seed reveals the presence of these trees in former geological periods and throughout Europe, Asia and North America. Currently this genus is restricted to North America. The first *Nyssa* species described was a swamp-growing type. Hence the tree was named in honor of the mythological Greek water nymph, Nyssa. The specific epithet, *sylvatica*, means "of woods." This species has two common names: blackgum, referring to the dark leaves, while tupelo comes from the Creek Indian name "ito opilwa", which means "swamp tree".



Botanical Characteristics:

Native habitat: Dry hills or wet flatlands of the eastern U.S.; a Kentucky native.

Growth habit: Pyramidal when young, blackgum develops a distinctive jagged outline with age.

Tree size: This slow-growing tree attains a height of 40 to 50 feet and a width of 20 to 30 feet.

Flower and fruit: Flowers are small and insignificant. The bitter, 1-inch blue-black berries are favored by wildlife but are not particularly ornamental.

Leaf: This species' outstanding feature is its dark, glossy foliage that consistently develops spectacular crimson, yellow or orange fall color.

Hardiness: Winter hardy to USDA zone 4.

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Leaves in autumn

Additional information:

Aged blackgums begin decaying from the top so trees become shorter as they grow older. Because decay begins in the heartwood, there are many hollow blackgum trees in the forest. The hollow trees are cut down and then cut into short sections and used for bee hives. Blackgum is one of the best honey-producing trees in the world.

Because of its twisted grain, blackgum cannot be split so it has been somewhat spared by lumbermen. The resilient wood is well suited for tool handles.