

Species Spotlight: The Black Gum

Aren't we all looking for the perfect tree? One that grows almost anywhere, provides ecological value, and is beautiful to boot? Black gum, *Nyssa sylvatica*, might be the very tree we've all been searching for...and we happen to have a few right here in the Garden. Extending in range from Ontario to Mexico, the black gum is a versatile, resilient tree with incredible ecosystem contributions. Also called "black tupelo" and "pepperidge," the black gum typically reaches between 60 and 80 feet tall and up to 35 feet wide. Its shiny elliptical leaves are leather-like and stand out against the tree's gray bark, which is likened to alligator skin due to its irregular grooves. Black gum is a slow grower, gaining about one to two feet in height each year, but it can live on for centuries. The oldest known specimen today is almost 700 years old. As if that isn't enough, black gum really stands out in terms of its fall foliage. The dense canopy changes from deep green to a striking mosaic of gold, orange, scarlet, and purple come autumn.

In addition to its stunning appearance, black gum flourishes in a wide range of conditions. The species grows in most soil types as long as they are slightly acidic with at least partial sun. It can be found in both soggy lowlands and dry highlands, although it generally prefers moist soil. Black gum also tolerates fire, deer, drought, salt, and temporary flooding, making it a pretty tough tree. It is not threatened seriously by any pests, although forest tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma disstria*) and Tupelo leaf miner (*Antispila nyssaefolia*) and may cause minor damage until identified. However, should serious damage occur to the tree, its stump will produce sprouts to restore growth.

Perhaps the most redeeming feature of the black gum is its habitat worth. Natural crooks in the tree provide areas for animals like bats and tree frogs to nest. Its dark blue fruits feed foxes, turkeys, birds, and bears in the fall, and both beavers and deer nibble on the sprouts and twigs. Black gum flower nectar attracts bees, and they in turn produce a tasty, mild honey for harvest. The pretty light wood of the black gum is also used in production of goods ranging from paper pulp and docks to veneers and gunstocks. You might see the black gum scattered throughout the Appalachian Mountains amongst groves of oaks, dogwoods, black cherries and hickories. Take a trip outside for a meditative stroll and enjoy the black gum's shade as summer begins.

Sources:

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