

Plant Profiles: HORT 2242 Landscape Plants II

Botanical Name: *Liquidambar styraciflua*

Common Name: American sweetgum, sweet-gum

Family Name: Hamamelidaceae - witchhazel family

General Description: *Liquidambar styraciflua* is a large deciduous tree with distinctive star-shaped leaves and brown, spike-like "gum ball" fruit. It is native in rich bottomland soils of southeastern United States including the southern portion of Illinois. For use in the Chicago area it is important to select from northern seed or nursery sources. The Morton Arboretum suggests using the cultivar 'Moraine' for improved cold hardiness.

Zone: 5-9

Resources Consulted:

Dirr, Michael A. *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants: Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses*. Champaign: Stipes, 2009. Print.

"The PLANTS Database." *USDA, NRCS*. National Plant Data Team, Greensboro, NC 27401-4901 USA, 2014. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

"Sweet-gum." *Trees & Plants*. Morton Arboretum, 2013. Web. 22 March 2014.

Swink, Floyd, and Gerould Wilhelm. *Plants of the Chicago Region*. Indianapolis: Indiana Academy of Science, 1994. Print.

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Keywords/Tags: *Liquidambar styraciflua*, American sweetgum, sweet-gum, deciduous, tree



Whole plant/Habit:

- Description: American sweetgum is a large deciduous tree with a pyramidal shape when young. Mature habit varies from broad-rounded to narrow-oblong as seen in this image.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: October 31, 2010
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_1220162.png



Bark:

- Description: The grayish brown bark is ridged and furrowed.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: March 18, 2006
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_0358.png



Branch/Twig:

- Description: Newest stem growth is reddish-yellow. Second year stem color is silver with some stems developing corky ridges or “wings”. Stem features are useful identification tools. This is a “touch and sniff” tree as the stem, buds and leaves, when crushed or scratched, emit a fragrant “camphor-like” odor.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: March 18, 2006
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_0450.png



Bud:

- Description: *Liquidambar styraciflua* has an alternate bud arrangement. The large, imbricate terminal buds are reddish-yellow, glossy and feel sticky to the touch. The terminal buds will serve as an excellent identification feature. The lateral buds are a similar color but much smaller.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: March 3, 2006
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_0211.png



Flower:

- Description: American sweetgum is monoecious. It produces separate male and female flowers on the same plant. The male (staminate) flowers are in upright racemes; the female (pistillate) flowers form a globose head on a drooping stalk (peduncle). They form as the leaves emerge and are not showy.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: April 28, 2010
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_1160774.png



Fruit:

- Description: The fruit is a cluster of spiky capsules that, when mature, open to release two seeds each.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: October 30, 2005
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_4401.png



Fruit:

- Description: The 1 to 1-1/2 inch woody brown fruit clusters resemble a medieval mace and are a distinctive identification feature. They are produced in large amounts and can be a litter problem and potential safety hazard. On the other hand, the fruits can be quite useful in dried floral arrangements or craft projects.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: March 18, 2006
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_0401.png



Leaf:

- Description: The leaves are simple, alternate, 5-7 lobed and star-shaped. The leaves are glossy green during summer turning color late in the autumn season.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: June 19, 2005
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_2446.png



Leaf:

- Description: Fall color is usually an outstanding mix of yellow, orange, red and purple.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: October 30, 2005
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_4399B.png



Winter interest:

- Description: The straight trunk, persistent fruit capsules and gray-silver cast to the silhouette provide a subtle winter interest.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: February 8, 2009
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_1110119.png

**Special ID feature(s):**

- Description: The distinctive star-shaped leaves, outstanding fall color, spiny fruit and large imbricate buds make this plant easy to identify anytime of the year.
- Image Source: Karren Wcisel, TreeTopics.com
- Image Date: October 30, 2005
- Image File Name: sweet_gum_4398.png