

Black Gum (*nyssa sylvatica*)

Hardiness zones: 3-9

Height: 30-50 feet

Spread: 20-30 feet

Flower color: greenish white

Fall color: yellow, orange, red, purple

Soil moisture: medium to wet

Soil type: various

Light: full sun to part shade

Growth rate: slow to moderate

Shape: pyramidal

Drought tolerance: high

When you see the beautiful red leaves of the black gum, you know fall is on its way. This Missouri native is among the first trees to change its color and it doesn't disappoint. The black gum goes by many different names including black tupelo, sour gum and Pepperidge. Regardless of what you call it, it is one of the most attractive native trees around.



The black gum makes an excellent shade tree



Thin leaves appear to glow when the sun shines on them



Fall brilliance

The black gum flowers in May and June after the leaves have emerged. Although the flowers themselves are not a particularly noteworthy feature of the tree, they provide nectar needed for the production of honey. By summer, the leaves have become a glossy, dark green color and are quite attractive. The high gloss will remain on the leaf through its fall metamorphosis. The bark of the tree matures to a medium gray color and resembles alligator hide. The black gum begins bearing fruit in October. These dark blue berries are an important food source for many birds and mammals and are the reason the tree is often referred to as the "sour gum".



Glossy green leaves of summer



Dark purple berries of the black gum



Flowers of the black gum are a source of nectar for bees

The most spectacular feature of this tree is the fall foliage. The black gum is among the first to change color in the fall. The glossy leaves turn many shades of yellow, orange, bright red, purple or scarlet, sometimes on the same branch (right). It makes a strong specimen tree that works well as an ornamental shade or street tree. In addition to providing cavities and nesting sites for a variety of birds and mammals, it suffers from no serious insect or disease problems.

As the tree grows, the branches will begin to droop and will require pruning to provide clearance for both vehicles and pedestrians. The black gum is a slow growing, tenacious tree capable of living beyond 400 years.



A myriad of colors on one branch