
Wildflower Spot – April 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SWEETGUM

Liquidambar styraciflua

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton*

This tree is easily recognized in winter condition with the corky twigs and drooping, spiny fruit balls. Sweetgum is a large tree with a straight trunk, rounded crown, and deeply ridged gray bark. In early spring inconspicuous greenish flowers are in ball-like clusters along with shiny green leaves arranged alternately on the branch, with distinctive 5-7 starlike lobes. They are aromatic when crushed, and turn reddish in autumn. The leaves of Sweetgum are sometimes confused with those of maples which also show palmate lobes, but the leaves of maples are arranged opposite each other on the twig.

Sweetgum grows in moist or wet woodlands and is widely distributed, ranging from the Connecticut coast to the highlands of Guatemala, mostly in the coastal zone. In Virginia, Sweetgum is found in the eastern and central counties. Flowers appear in April-May; fruits in September-November.

The common name is derived from *liquidus*, “fluid”, and the Arabic *ambar*, alluding to the fragrant gum which exudes from the tree. An important timber tree, Sweetgum is a leading furniture wood, used for cabinetwork, veneer



and boxes. It takes stains readily and is often finished to resemble expensive woods.

While much used as a fast-growing ornamental tree, the fallen seedheads are a nuisance on lawns. But the fruit-balls, sometimes spray-painted, are popular in dried floral arrangements.

Several species of songbirds and squirrels eat the seeds; beaver often use this species when available. Sweetgum was first reported by the Spanish naturalist, Hernandez, in Mexico City in 1615, and introduced to England in 1688. ❖

Photo: Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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