

Sweetgum, a Beautiful Mess

By Susan Camp

Sometimes autumn leaves don't fall the way we hope they will. Late summer weather conditions can affect the leaves' annual Technicolor show. High temperatures and scant summer rainfall can cause the leaves to turn brown, shrivel up, and fall disappointingly to parched ground. Several days of hard rain and wind can rip the leaves off the branches and deposit them in the yard in a sodden mess.

I thought that might be the case this autumn, but the trees have given an excellent showing on the Middle Peninsula this year. There was no reason to head for the Skyline Drive last month. We can't compete in the panorama department (no mountains), but we have had our own share of gorgeous red, yellow, orange, and purple.

Musing on the beauty of the season led me to walk around our property a few days ago, enjoying the colors, the spicy scent of fallen leaves, and the sound they make under my feet as I scuffle through them. I found myself beneath a tree I don't often visit: a *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Rotundiloba', a sweetgum cultivar with rounded, rather than pointed, leaves. Tucked too close to a towering magnolia, the little 'Rotundiloba' doesn't get a chance to show off, but it is a special tree, nonetheless.

The parent tree, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, is native to the southeastern United States, southern Mexico, and Central America. Its enchanting proper name means "liquid amber flowing with styrax", a type of gum or resin. The fragrant liquid amber seeps out when the bark is cut. It has been used in folk medicine, perfume, incense, and chewing gum. The satiny, close-grained wood is used primarily for veneer, indoor trim, railroad ties, and pulpwood. It is not hardy enough for outdoor use.

The sweetgum tree can grow over 100 feet tall with a 50 foot spread in a sunny location. It prefers moist, well-drained bottomland with a pH of 3.7 to 6.8. In alkaline soil, iron chlorosis will occur, causing yellowing of the leaves. Sweetgum is moderately drought and salt tolerant. Scale insects, bagworms, tent caterpillars, and fall webworms are the most frequent pests.

The glossy, dark green leaves are star-shaped with three to seven sharp points. In autumn sweetgum leaves turn brilliant orange and red, intermingled with purple and brown. Further south, leaves may remain on the trees in the fall with minimal color change.

The nondescript female flowers of the sweetgum appear in the spring. The fruit, on the other hand, is very conspicuous, especially under our feet, and the reason that many people do not appreciate the loveliness of the sweetgum tree. The hard, round, spiky fruit consists of capsules, each containing one or two seeds. When the fruit ripens, the capsules open to eject the seeds, which are eaten by birds and squirrels. The fruits persist on the trees throughout the winter, only

to drop in the spring and cover all open areas, rendering walking a treacherous endeavor. It is rumored that sweetgum ball dropping season, rather than NCAA basketball, is the true reason for March Madness. Popular cultivars that set fruit include 'Burgundy', 'Festival', and 'Gumball'. I would pass on the last one.

This brings me back to our 'Rotundiloba'. It is special because it is a sterile cultivar and does not produce gum balls. 'Rotundiloba' is hardy to USDA Hardiness Zones 5B through 10A and has the same culture requirements as other Liquidambar cultivars. Fall color is deep purple, although our tree is sheltered enough by the big magnolia that the leaves haven't turned yet. They will be gorgeous when they do change.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 2901-1072 and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Plant Fact Sheet "Sweetgum" offer basic information on the tree. USDA US Forest Service publication "Liquidambar styraciflua 'Rotundiloba' " provides information on the sterile cultivar.

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