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**Wildflower Spot – November 2007**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## SOURWOOD

*Oxydendron arboreum*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Sourwood is a rewarding tree in all seasons; in spring the tree is covered with lacy white fronds of flowers, suggesting its other name, “lily of the valley tree”. Fall turns the leaves deep red and the fingers of white flowers become clusters of creamy fruits.

Many members of the heath family have small, white, bell-like flowers that are clustered mostly at ends of twigs. Sourwood is the only full-size tree in the heath family with flowers and fruits of the heath type. The sour-tasting leaves are narrow to egg-shaped with a line of hairs on the midvein on the underside.

Hardy to zones 5 to 9, sourwood prefers full to part sun in slightly acidic, moist, well-drained soils, but does well in dry soil. However, the root system is shallow, and it does not transplant well. Sourwood tree trunks do not stand straight and tall, they always lean away from the vertical. When the leaves are gone, these leaning trunks are good identification for sourwood.

This mid-sized tree (20-30 feet tall) ranges from New Jersey south to Florida and



Louisiana, growing in rich woods. It is found in all counties across Virginia except for those in northern Virginia.

With no major pests or diseases, this native tree is worth considering as a landscape element. The flowers attract bees and butterflies, and produce seeds for birds. Sourwood honey can be found in local food outlets. ❖