

“Sweet Gum” by Sally Cureton

One of the most beautiful trees at this time of the year is a sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). The leaves turn the most gorgeous shades of orange, red and burgundy in the fall. This is a large tree (60-100 feet high) with a straight trunk. Its leaves are star shaped, similar to a maple leaf. During the spring and summer sweet gum leaves are a shiny dark green, making it an attractive tree in three seasons. The only downside to this tree is its fruit. These are well-known to most of us, little brown balls about 1-1 ¼ inch in diameter with curved prickly points all over them. These points have been known to puncture car tires. The seeds found in this fruit are eaten by many wild birds such as eastern goldfinches, purple finches, sparrows and mourning doves. They will also be eaten by small animals such as chipmunks and squirrels.

Sweet gums are ancient trees that are known throughout the world. The oldest variety is over 55 million years old. An important species since the Aztec Empire, there are twenty known extinct species of Sweet gum. The sap of this tree has known a variety of uses throughout the ages. It can be boiled down to make a balsam that has been used to cure skin problems. It can also be used as incense or combined with tobacco to form a sleeping agent.

This is considered an excellent tree for landscaping because of its relatively fast growth and high resilience to insects. Also it will grow in a variety of soils - acidic, loamy, moist, sandy, wet, or clay, but does require moist soil conditions. If you are looking for an attractive, relatively fast growing tree that can be used by wildlife, it is hard to go wrong with a Sweet gum.