

Sourwood, *Oxydendrum arboreum*

Alex X. Niemiera, Associate Professor, Department of Horticulture

Summary

Foliage: About 5 inches long; alternate; deciduous

Height: About 25 feet

Spread: About 15 to 20

Shape: Conical in youth; oval to irregular at maturity

Main Features

Sourwood is a small slow-growing tree although forest specimens exceed this small status. This species is certainly worthy to be a specimen plant (sufficient attributes to be featured as a focal point). Sourwood has beautiful lustrous foliage in the growing season which turns a bright maroon to pink-red in the fall. In June/July it has delicate 8-inch-long somewhat pendulous white flower clusters that persist for about three weeks. Tan seedpods are somewhat showy and persist into the winter. Bark on mature trees is gray and blocky, and to those initiated in the bark appreciation sect, is quite handsome. Mature trees will also have an irregular somewhat contorted form which also adds to its beauty. Despite its grace and beauty, sourwood trees are notorious for being difficult to establish in landscapes. If you plant ten trees, four or five will die and half of the survivors will be unthrifty. Why such a poor transplant survival rate? Part of the issue is related to exacting cultural requirements. Sourwoods require a well-drained acid soil. They are in the same plant family as rhododendrons and azaleas, the heath family (Ericaceae), which also requires a well-drained acid soil. Poor transplant survival may also be attributed to the temperamental nature of sourwood physiology, i.e., the nature of the beast. Planting container-grown plants can increase transplant success. Sourwood plants are noted as being sensitive to air pollution, thus this species may not be suited to urban environments.

Plant Needs

Zone: 5 to 9

Light: Full sun to part shade

Moisture: Average to somewhat dry

Soil type: Well drained

pH range: Acid

Functions

Sourwood can certainly serve as a specimen plant (sufficient attributes that allow it to be featured as a focal point) due to its foliage (growing season and fall), persistent seed pods, flowers, mature picturesque (gnarly) form, and blocky bark. However, as mentioned in the Main Features section, this species requires exacting cultural requirements.

Care

Sourwood is a low maintenance tree with very few pest problems providing that one heed the cultural recommendations noted in the Main Features section.

Additional Information

Sourwood trees produce one of the finest tasting honeys. The common name is derived from the fact that chewed leaves have a tart acid taste, some liken it to a sour apple.