**Blackgum**  
*Nyssa sylvatica*

**Introduction**

Sourgum is a hardwood tree which grows to 75 feet tall, has a medium growth rate, pyramidal shape with horizontal branches growing from a typically straight trunk. But the shape of the crown varies from tree to tree and, unfortunately, this is looked upon by some architects as undesirable. As the tree grows to 10 and 15-years-old, crown form becomes more uniform among trees. Lower branches droop with age and will need to be removed if used as a street tree. Growth habit is similar to pin oak, a tree which many people are familiar with. Providing a brilliant display of red to deep purple foliage in the fall, Sourgum surprises most people since it does not particularly stand out in the landscape until then. The small, blue fruits may be considered a litter nuisance in urban/suburban plantings but are quite popular with many birds and mammals, and they wash away quickly.

**General Information**

- **Scientific name:** Nyssa sylvatica
- **Pronunciation:** NISS-uh sill-VAT-ih-kuh
- **Common name(s):** Blackgum, Sourgum, Black Tupelo  
  - Family: Nyssaceae
- **USDA hardiness zones:** 4B through 9B
- **Origin:** native to North America
- **Invasive potential:** little invasive potential
- **Uses:** reclamation; specimen; street without sidewalk; shade; parking lot island 100-200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median
- **Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

**Description**

- **Height:** 65 to 75 feet
Spread: 25 to 35 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: pyramidal, oval
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: slow
Texture: medium

Foliage
Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), oblong
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches, 4 to 8 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: orange, red
Fall characteristic: showy

Flower
Flower color: white/cream/gray
Flower characteristics: not showy

Fruit
Fruit shape: oval, round
Fruit length: less than .5 inch
Fruit covering: fleshy
Fruit color: blue
**Fruit characteristics:** attracts birds; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically one trunk; thorns

**Pruning requirement:** little required

**Breakage:** resistant

**Current year twig color:** gray, brown

**Current year twig thickness:** thin, medium

**Wood specific gravity:** 0.50

**Culture**

**Light requirement:** full sun, partial sun or partial shade

**Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; loam; acidic; extended flooding; well-drained

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Aerosol salt tolerance:** moderate

**Other**

**Roots:** not a problem

**Winter interest:** yes

**Outstanding tree:** yes

**Ozone sensitivity:** tolerant

**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** susceptible

**Pest resistance:** free of serious pests and diseases

**Use and Management**

Sourgum prefers a moist, slightly acid soil. Larger specimens may be difficult to transplant from deep, well-drained field soil because of its deep roots and should only be transplanted from the field in the spring. Therefore, it is usually seen growing in containers at the nursery. Little pruning is required to form a well-structured tree since the trunk stays straight and branches usually grow at wide angles with the trunk. Sourgum makes a good street or parking lot tree for suburban neighborhoods, possibly for downtown areas. It should be used more often for this purpose but will benefit from occasional
irrigation in droughts. Does amazingly well in wet, compacted soils typical of many urban areas with highly disturbed clay soil. It is also somewhat salt-tolerant for planting along the shore.

Sourgum is rarely attacked by pests, and when it is they are rarely serious enough to warrant control.

Nyssa sylvatica var. sylvatica grows on moist sites; var. aquatica has a buttressed and swollen trunk base and grows in swamps. Nyssa bicolor is very similar and often confused with Nyssa sylvatica.

Pests

Scales, including Sourgum scale, can be controlled with horticultural oil.

Forest tent caterpillar can defoliate the tree in the spring. Unless defoliation is extensive in two or more successive years, control is not needed.

Diseases

Several fungi cause cankers on Sourgum. As the cankers enlarge the infected stems die back. Trunk cankers cause tree dieback. Prune out infected branches and keep trees healthy.

Leaf spots cause purplish blotches on the upper leaf surface. Rake up and destroy infected leaves in the fall to reduce the disease potential for the following year, if you wish.

Recently a large number of trees have been discovered dying in the mountains of North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia. The causal agent is unknown but symptoms include leaf spots, branch cankers, leaves dying and hanging on the tree, and leaf blotches.