

Plant Profile: Sourwood Tree

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Sourwood Tree

The Sourwood Tree (*Oxydendrum arboretum*) is native only to North America and can be found from Virginia to North Carolina and in southwestern Pennsylvania, southern Ohio, Indiana, western Kentucky, Tennessee, the Appalachians to western Florida, and the coasts of Mississippi and Louisiana. Often referred to as a “tree for all seasons,” *O. arboretum* is beautiful all year round, with shiny dark green leaves in the spring and summer, lily-of-the-valley like blooms in June, and beautiful fall foliage, which may be red, purple or yellow - and often all three colors on one tree at the same time. The Sourwood tree was first introduced into cultivation in 1747.

Sourwood trees are broad, conical-shaped trees, with branches drooping gracefully downwards. The leaves are simple, oblong, and lance-tipped, tapering to a point. They range in size from 3 to 8 inches in length and 1-1/2 to 3-1/2 inches in width. The leaf margins are minutely toothed. New growth on the tree is often scarlet-red in color, maturing first to an olive-green color before attaining gray-brown colored bark. The bark on the trunks develops as a blocky, alligator-like appearance. The flowers, which resemble lily-of-valley or blueberry flowers, are co-sexual, containing both male and female parts within each individual flower.



Sourwood leaves

The Sourwood Tree grows in zones 5 -9, and does well in slightly acidic, well-drained soils. It doesn't do well in dry, alkaline soils, or in locations where its roots might be disturbed, such as along urban roadways. The tree is not pollution-tolerant and is not fully cold-hardy in zone 5, where severe winters will cause young twigs to die off.



Sourwood flowers

The name “Sourwood” comes from the acidic taste of the leaves. Pioneers used various parts of the Sourwood Tree as an ingredient in medicinal concoctions to treat multiple maladies – the sap as an ingredient in a concoction to reduce fevers, chewing the bark to reduce mouth pain, and a tea made from the leaves to treat digestive issues. Even today, some hikers in the Appalachians will drink tea made from Sourwood leaves to reduce excessive thirst. The honey made by bees in an area dense with sourwood trees is prized for its delicious flavor. The lumber from the tree is exceptionally hard and

durable; it is used to make rakes and tool handles, and wagon sled runners.

There are several cultivars that are available, including:

- ❖ *Oxydendrum arboretum* ‘Albomarginatum’ – white leaf margins and white marbling.
- ❖ *Oxydendrum arboretum* ‘Chameleon’ – upright conical shape
- ❖ *Oxydendrum arboretum* Mt. Charm’ - symmetrical shape with early fall color.