



Oxydendrum arboreum Sourwood¹

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INTRODUCTION

Sourwood usually grows as a pyramid or narrow oval with a more or less straight trunk at a height of 25 to 35 feet but can reach 50 to 60 feet tall with a spread of 25 to 30 feet (Fig. 1). Occasionally young specimens have a more open spreading habit reminiscent of Redbud. Leaves are dark, lustrous green and appear to weep or hang from the twigs. Branches droop toward the ground forming a graceful outline when planted as a single specimen. The branching pattern and persistent fruit make the tree interesting in the winter. The mid- to late-summer flowers are borne in terminal clusters of racemes which curve upward, creating a graceful effect at flowering time. The fall color is a striking red and orange which is rivaled by only a few other trees such as Blackgum, Chinese Pistache, the pears, and Chinese Tallowtree. There are few sights that are as striking as a row of Sourwood in fall color.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Oxydendrum arboreum*

Pronunciation: ock-sih-DEN-drum ar-BORE-ee-um

Common name(s): Sourwood, Sorrel-Tree

Family: *Ericaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 5 through 9A (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America

Uses: recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; shade tree; specimen; no proven urban tolerance

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

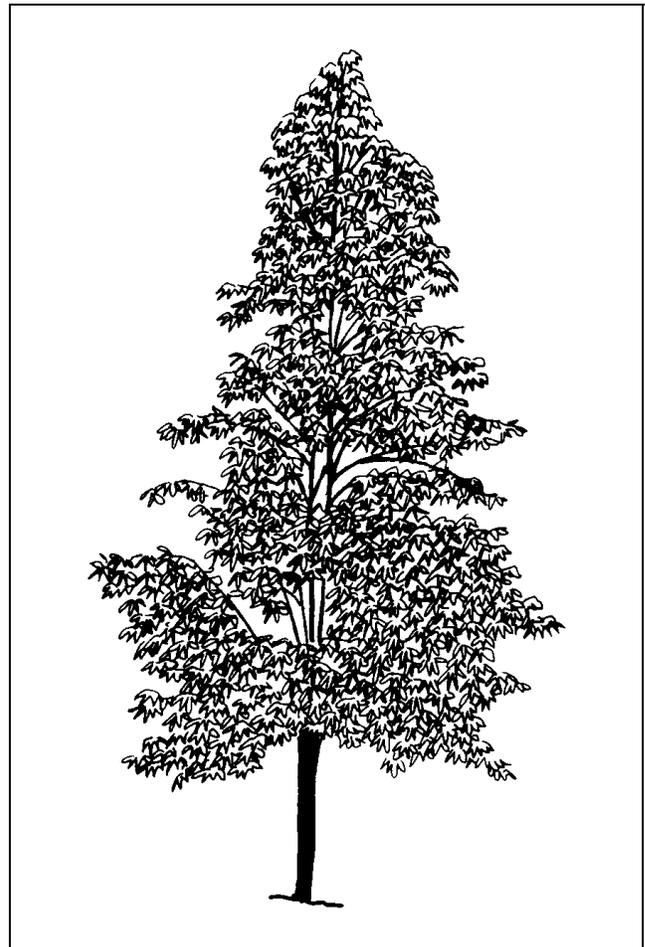


Figure 1. Middle-aged Sourwood.

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

DESCRIPTION

Height: 40 to 60 feet
Spread: 25 to 30 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette
Crown shape: oval; pyramidal
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: slow
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire; serrulate; undulate
Leaf shape: lanceolate; oblong
Leaf venation: banchidodrome; pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: orange; red
Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white
Flower characteristics: showy; summer flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval
Fruit length: < .5 inch
Fruit covering: dry or hard
Fruit color: brown
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; inconspicuous and not showy; no significant litter problem; persistent on the tree

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; not particularly showy; should be grown with a single leader; no thorns
Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green; reddish
Current year twig thickness: medium; thin



Figure 3. Foliage of Sourwood.

Irrigation is required during hot, dry weather to keep leaves on the tree. Reportedly not highly drought-tolerant, but there are beautiful specimens in USDA hardiness zone 7 growing in the open sun in poor clay with no irrigation.

Pests

Pests are usually not a problem for Sourwood. Fall webworm can defoliate portions of the tree in summer and fall but usually control is not needed.

Diseases

Twig blight kills leaves at the branch tips. Trees in poor health seem to be more susceptible. Prune out infected branch tips and fertilize. Leaf spots can discolor some leaves but are not serious other than causing premature defoliation.

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun;
tree grows in full sun

Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic;
well-drained

Drought tolerance: moderate

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

USE AND MANAGEMENT

The tree grows slowly, adapts to sun or shade, and prefers a slightly acid, peaty loam. The tree transplants easily when young and from containers of any size. Sourwood grows well in confined soil spaces with good drainage making it a candidate for urban plantings but is largely untried as a street tree. It is reportedly sensitive to air pollution injury.