



American Sweetgum

Liquidambar styraciflua

Witch-Hazel Family (Hamamelidaceae)

Zones: 5-9

Full Sun

Moderate Water

Location: Amphitheatre Garden

Imagine taking a walk through the Garden on a crisp, sunny autumn afternoon. As you come into the Amphitheater, you see a beautiful sight behind the stage - tall trees covered in yellow, red and purple star-shaped leaves. All of those gorgeous colors on every tree! You have just encountered American Sweetgum, maybe even for the first time. The leaves of American Sweetgum are star-shaped, dark glossy green in summer, and turning to rich yellow-purple-red tones in the fall. Because Sweetgums are often grown from seed, fall color can vary from tree to tree. Sweetgums are often confused with Maples because of their similar leaf shape, however, the arrangement of the leaves on the branch is different. Maple leaves are opposite each other on the branch (two at a node), while Sweetgum leaves are alternate (one at a node). The fruit is also different from that of a Maple's two-winged samara. The fruit of Sweetgum is a spiky brown ball about 1 inch in diameter, which persists into winter.

Sweetgums are tall trees, typically growing 60 to 75 feet tall, and have a very upright, pyramidal shape. The bark is gray and furrowed, with winged ridges on many of the branches. Sweetgums make great street trees or lawn trees if you don't mind the fruit. Consider planting them away from an area with a lot of traffic or where you enjoy walking barefoot, as the spiky fruit can be unpleasant to step on.

Sweetgums need full sun, deep moist soil, and plenty of room for root development. They are susceptible to iron chlorosis and not tolerant of heavy pollution. However, our Garden specimens haven't had problems with either since they were planted in 1985.

The botanical name of American Sweetgum, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, is a double reference to the resin produced by the tree. *Liquidambar* comes from the Latin *liquidus*, meaning "fluid or liquid", and *ambar*, meaning "amber". *styraciflua* means "flowing with gum." The golden, aromatic resin is used in making perfumes, adhesives, and salves. Native Americans and settlers used the sap as chewing gum and as a treatment for a number of ailments in both humans and domestic animals. Sweetgum wood is also an important product. The hard, durable wood is used in making furniture, veneer, interior finishing and wooden bowls.