

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. 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



Figure 1. Middle-aged *Oxydendrum arboreum*: Sourwood
Credits: Ed Gilman

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: 5A through 9A (Fig. 2)

Origin: native to North America



Figure 2. Range

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Invasive potential: little invasive potential

Uses: specimen; highway median; shade

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

Description

Height: 40 to 60 feet

Spread: 25 to 30 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: pyramidal, oval

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: slow

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: serrulate, entire, undulate

Leaf shape: oblong, lanceolate

Leaf venation: pinnate, brachidodrome

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: red, orange

Fall characteristic: showy



Figure 3. Foliage

Flower

Flower color: white/cream/gray

Flower characteristics: showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: brown

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves not 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: green, reddish

Current year twig thickness: thin, medium

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade

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

Drought tolerance: moderate

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: yes

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

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. 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.