

Magnolia virginiana: Sweetbay Magnolia¹

Edward F. Gilman, Dennis G. Watson, Ryan W. Klein, Andrew K. Koeser, Deborah R. Hilbert, and Drew C. McLean²

Introduction

Sweetbay magnolia is a graceful southern, evergreen to semi-evergreen, wide columnar tree, ideal for use as a patio tree or specimen. It can grow to a mature height of 50 feet in the north or to 60 feet in the south. Trees glimmer in the wind due to the whitish-green undersides of the leaves. They are very noticeable as you drive by them on interstates along water-logged woodlands. The tree provides excellent vertical definition in a shrub border or as a free-standing specimen and flourishes in moist, acid soil such as the swamps in the eastern U.S. and along stream banks. The creamy-white, lemon-scented flowers appear from June through September, and are followed by small red seeds which are used by a variety of wildlife. It can be trained into a multi-trunked, spreading specimen plant, or left with the central leader intact as a wide column.

General Information

Scientific name:

Pronunciation: mag-NO-lee-uh ver-jin-ee-AY-nuh **Common name(s):** sweetbay magnolia, swamp magnolia

Family: Magnoliaceae

USDA hardiness zones: 5A through 10A (Figure 2) **Origin:** native to the Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains, from

East Texas to New York

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: native



Figure 1. Full Form - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: UF/IFAS

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- 2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; Andrew K. Koeser, assistant professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center; Deborah R. Hilbert, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; and Drew C. McLean, biological scientist, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Uses: deck or patio; specimen; street without sidewalk; espalier; tree lawn 4-6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; highway median

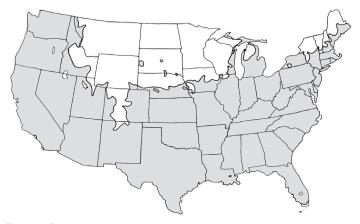


Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 40 to 50 feet **Spread:** 15 to 25 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical Crown shape: columnar, vase Crown density: moderate Growth rate: moderate Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate Leaf type: simple



Figure 3. Leaf, Top - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: UF/IFAS

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), oblong **Leaf venation:** brachidodrome, pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous, semi-evergreen,

evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 ½ to 6 inches

Leaf color: green to dark yellow on top, silvery white

underneath

Fall color: no color change **Fall characteristic:** not showy



Figure 4. Leaf, Under - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: UF/IFAS

Flower

Flower color: creamy white

Flower characteristics: very showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: ovoid; cone-like

Fruit length: 2 inches
Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: red to brown with maturity

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not

a litter problem **Fruiting:** late summer

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches don't droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: reddish brown to pale gray, smooth, and becoming rough with age



Figure 5. Flower - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: UF/IFAS

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green Current year twig thickness: thin Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 6. Bark, Young - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: UF/IFAS

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

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

Drought tolerance: low **Aerosol salt tolerance:** low



Figure 7. Bark, Mature - *Magnolia virginiana*: sweetbay magnolia Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

Other

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: no
Outstanding tree: yes
Ozone sensitivity: tolerant

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: susceptible **Pest resistance:** resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

Sweetbay magnolia makes an excellent tree for planting next to buildings, in narrow alleys or corridors, or in other urban areas with limited space for horizontal crown expansion. It has not been planted extensively in downtown urban areas, but its flood and drought tolerance and narrow crown combine to make it a good candidate. It usually maintains a good, straight central leader, although occasionally the trunk branches low to the ground forming a round multi-stemmed, spreading tree. It should be grown and planted more often.

Sweetbay magnolia roots easily from softwood cuttings, grows freely near coastal areas, and is happiest in southern climates. It is thriving in the Auburn Shade Tree Evaluation trials in Alabama without irrigation. However, in the confined soil spaces typical of some urban areas, occasional irrigation is recommended.

The species is deciduous in USDA hardiness zones 7 and 8 (evergreen farther south), but the variety *australis* and cultivar 'Henry Hicks' are evergreen. 'Havener' has larger flower petals.

Pests and Diseases

Scales sometimes infest foliage and twigs, particularly on dry sites where the tree is under stress.

Tulip-poplar weevil (sassafras weevil) feeds as a leaf miner when young and chews holes in the leaves as an adult.

Leaf spots occasionally occur on the foliage but are of little concern.

References

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