

# *Magnolia virginiana*: Sweetbay Magnolia<sup>1</sup>

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## 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

1. This document is ENH-543, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2018. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
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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

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. Trees: North & Central Florida. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

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