

Wood of The Month

Sweet Gum, Red Gum – Liquidambar styraciflua



The sweet gum tree that is native to this area and the area of most of the eastern part of the United States from New York State to Texas to Florida and even the state of California, produces two types of wood. The heartwood has a reddish brown color, often with dark streaks and usually highly figured while the sapwood is pinkish-white in color and is often stained blue with sap stains whose pattern is much more muted than the heartwood. The heartwood and sapwood of sweet gum are usually sold separately. The heartwood is usually sold as **red gum** while the less commercial sapwood is called **sap gum** or **sweet gum**.

The tree is a large tree up to 130 feet tall, with a long, cylindrical trunk, pyramid-shaped crown and corky wings on branches and twigs. It is easily identified by its star shaped leaves with 5 (sometimes 7) lobes with sharp points and glossy dark green color which turn bright red to gold, pink and even purple in the fall. The red leaf color is where the red gum name comes from rather than the wood color as often thought. As mentioned before, the sapwood is seldom sold commercially but can be obtained from tree trimming, storm damage or tree removal because the sapwood is very wide and only the larger trees have heartwood large enough to produce lumber. Those trees grow mostly in the southeastern US. Other common names that sweet gum is known by are; sap gum, alligator-tree, alligator wood, hazel pine, incense tree liquidambar, satin walnut, and star-leaved gum. While discussing names, there are also gum trees from Australia, but they are part of the Eucalyptus family. Red gum (sweet gum) is part of the witch hazel family. Belonging to yet another group are black gum and tupelo, which are members of the dogwood family.

Sweetgum has been cultivated since 1681. It is ornamental, rapid growing, long-lived, and relatively free from insects and disease damage. A popular urban tree, the town of St. James is called the sweetgum capital of Missouri for its streets lined with the tree. The tree's "gumballs" can be a messy problem in lawns but creating a mulch bed under the tree can solve that problem plus repel cats seeking an outdoor litter box.

The gum (hardened sap) was traditionally chewed for sore throats, coughs, colds, diarrhea, and ringworm; used externally for sores, skin ailments, wounds. It is the ingredient in "compound tincture of benzoin," available from pharmacies.

Red gum/sweet gum is used extensively in furniture, in panels, and in various cheap containers such as fruit baskets, boxes, crates, and cigar boxes, slack cooperage, mine props, railroad ties, pulp, kitchen cabinets and turned articles. A considerable quantity of red gum lumber is normally shipped abroad, mainly to England, France, and Germany, where it is used in the manufacture of furniture, some of which is re-exported to the United States and "satin walnut". Sweetgum turns very nicely and polishes very well and takes a good finish.

You can read more about sweet gum at; [Sweet gum on the Wood-database](#) and [Sweet gum on Wikipedia.org](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan