

## Wood of The Month



### *Nyssa spp* – Tupelo

There are basically two species of tupelo that grow here in Missouri. One is, Water tupelo, *Nyssa aquatica*, and Black gum, *Nyssa sylvatica*. When you buy tupelo you may actually get a mixture of the two as black gum is often mixed with the tupelo. They are closely related and have very similar characteristics and look, however, black gum has a wider distribution. Here in Missouri tupelo grows mainly in the southeastern boot heel area of the state and the territory for black gum stretches farther up into the state and farther west. Black gum, also called black tupelo, grows in acid soils on rocky wooded slopes, ridges, ravines, borders of sink-hole ponds in the Ozarks, and lowland forests. Water tupelo grows in swamps with bald cypress trees in the lowlands of the southeast. Black gum is often used as an ornamental for its brilliant foliage even though it is slow growing. Honey from the tupelo is very light and mild-tasting. Besides the excellent honey from bees, the tree is often used as the beehive because the heartwood decays first causing the tree to become hollow and providing the beehive. On Martha's Vineyard the black gum goes by another name; "beetlebung". The native whalers on the island used the local black gum tree to make tools, one of which was a mallet called the beetle used to pound in the bung of the oil barrels thus it was dubbed "beetlebung".

The wood is favored by carvers especially for wildfowl carvings. It takes fine details and holds paint well and does not fuzz up under power carving like basswood does. The heartwood is pale brownish-gray to light brown with a very wide, lighter colored sapwood. It is uniform in texture, has close interlocked grain and is without luster. Besides carving, it is used in woodenware, novelties, fixtures, handles, boxes, crates, the concealed parts of furniture and is an excellent wood for turnery.

Written by – Mel Bryan