

## The Stunning Black Gum Tree

Despite our cold weather, it is not too early to begin thinking about planting trees this spring. The Ludington Tree Advisory Board provides this tree description to assist in selecting trees for lawns and gardens. This description and others are available on the City of Ludington's website under Tree Advisory Board. A Preferred Tree List for Ludington summarizing characteristics of trees appropriate for our area also is available on the website.

The Black Gum tree (*Nyssa sylvatica*) is sometimes called Tupelo Gum or Sour Gum. *Nyssa* comes from the mythological Greek Water Nymph named Nyssa and *sylvatica* means "of the woods." Tolerant of urban conditions, this beautiful and stately shade tree is appropriate for planting as a specimen tree in lawns, as a street tree, and in parks. For adequate growth, full sun to partial shade (i.e., at least 4 hours per day) is needed. Because this tree has good resistance to most insect and disease problems and needs little pruning, it is considered low-maintenance. The tree prefers moist, well-drained acidic soil, but can tolerate poor soil drainage. Although Black Gum trees tolerate clay soil with high pH, they do not do as well as in acidic soil.

Mulching around a tree, especially a Black Gum, is beneficial in keeping roots moist, reducing weeds, preventing soil compaction, and reducing water loss. To get the most benefit from mulch apply it about 2-3 inches deep and extend it out about 3 feet from the trunk or to the tree's dripline. However, mulch should be kept away from the trunk of the tree. This can be accomplished by making a donut hole in the mulch surrounding the trunk. Creating a "mulch volcano" where mulch is piled high around the tree trunk should be avoided because it can be detrimental to trees resulting in pests, diseases, and/or tree decay.

The Black Gum is considered a medium-sized tree achieving a height of approximately 30-50 feet and a width of 20 to 30 feet. When young the tree has a pyramidal shape. As the tree matures its branches extend at right angles to the trunk and gently droop resulting in a more oval shape with a rounded crown. The tree's growth rate is slow to medium.

The tree's leaves are oval or elliptical in shape, wavy along the edges, and vary in size from about 3 to 6 inches. In summer they are glossy and dark green. The Black Gum is often the first tree to show fall color, sometimes as early as August. The tree's autumn colors are consistently amazing! Leaf colors include

crimson, purple, yellow or orange and all colors appear at the same time. Sunny conditions further enhance the colors. The Black Gum is one of the best trees for fall color and a very good option to maples.

The young tree's bark is gray and flaky, but as the tree age the bark develops furrows similar to alligator hide. Tiny greenish white flowers appear in the spring and attract butterflies and bees. Well-known tupelo honey is made from this nectar. Small (1/2 inch) purple fruits appear only on female trees and are a good food source for birds and mammals.

As part of Ludington's spring tree planting this year the Department of Public Works will plant 14 Black Gum trees throughout the city. As you walk about Ludington see if you can find the three Black Gum trees that will be planted in Water Front Park, two along the east side and two along the west side of the public marina, one in Stearns Park, four in the downtown area along Ludington Avenue, and two which will be planted along street right-of-ways.

