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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 97-6 / September 1997

Gene Silberhorn

Black Gum

Nyssa sylvatica Marsh.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Nyssa sylvatica is a medium sized tree ranging up to 50 feet (17 meters) tall, with deeply grooved, checkered bark at maturity. Leaves are deciduous, alternate, simple and usually have smooth margins. Leaf shape and size is variable even on the same branch. In general, the leaves are from 2 to 7 inches long (5 to 17 cm) and elliptic in shape, acutely tapering to a point. Fleshy, blue-black fruits (drupes) are produced late in the season. In winter, this tree can be identified by a chambered pith (twigs) and prominent buds. *Nyssa sylvatica* has relatively dull, thin leaves, whereas *Nyssa biflora*, a closely related species has darker green, shinny, somewhat leathery leaves. Both species usually show a brilliant red fall coloration in early autumn, often starting in late summer.

Distribution

Black gum ranges throughout much of eastern United States.

Habitat

Black gum may be found in both upland or wetlands. In wooded wetlands, this species is often associated with red maple (*Acer rubrum*, Wetland

Flora No.91-7, July 1991); sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*, Wetland Flora No.92-1, January 1991) and sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*, Wetland Flora no. 94-1, January 1994). *N. sylvatica* is seldom a dominant canopy species in forested wetlands. Seedlings and saplings are moderately shade tolerant and survive to become medium-sized trees. *Nyssa biflora* is more commonly found in wetlands than *N. sylvatica*.

Ecological Value/Benefits

Nyssa drupes are a good wildlife food. Many fleshy fruited wetland trees and shrubs have been featured in this series. Dead snags provide shelter for cavity-dwelling wildlife species.

Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Revision of The National List of Plant Species That Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Nyssa sylvatica* is classified as a facultative plant (FAC). FAC plants are "equally likely to occur in wetlands or non-wetlands (estimated probability 34%-66%)." *N. biflora* is classified as a facultative wetland plant (FACW). FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

Nyssa sylvatica Marsh.



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