

Sweetbay, A Yard-Sized Magnolia

By Susan Camp

As I walked up to our field on a perfect, early October day, I noticed signs of the approaching change of seasons. We haven't had a frost yet, and I hope we won't for several weeks to come, but the leaves on the tall tulip poplars (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) have already turned brown and are dropping. The native dogwood (*Cornus florida*) leaves are blush pink, and the black gums (*Nyssa sylvatica*) are taking on shades of orange, red, and burgundy.

One tree that won't be changing color and dropping leaves is the massive southern magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*) that sits majestically at the entrance to our property, surrounded on three sides-- and way too closely-- by several gigantic dawn redwoods (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) that will lose their fern-like leaves later in the fall.

I walked around the southern magnolia, marveling at the beauty of leathery, dark green leaves on graceful boughs that drape to the ground. We have not removed the lower limbs of the tree, and many years of old leaves carpet the cave-like space around the trunk, offering nutrients back to the tree roots as they decay.

I thought, "Everyone should have a tree like this," even as I realized that everyone doesn't have space on their property for such a huge tree. There are, however, numerous alternatives to southern magnolia. Sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) is native to the Atlantic coast as far north as New York in USDA Hardiness Zones 5 to 10. Evergreen or semi-evergreen in the coastal part of its range, sweetbay tends to be deciduous in the Piedmont

This pretty magnolia reaches a mature height of 10 to 35 feet with a similar spread. In the lower south, sweetbay tends to be tree-like, sometimes reaching 60 to 100 feet in height with an open crown. Farther north, sweetbay magnolia grows into an open, multi-stemmed, suckering shrub.

The undersides of the lance-shaped, glossy, dark green leaves are silver and covered with tiny hairs (called pubescence). Mature bark is silvery-gray. Cup-shaped, 9 to 12-petaled, creamy white flowers appear in May and June and may continue blooming into early fall. Each 2 to 3-inch flower opens during the daylight hours and closes at night, lasting for 2 to 3 days. The waxy blossoms have an enticing, lemony fragrance. Small cones studded with dangling red seeds appear after the flowers fade.

Birds and small mammals consume the seeds. Sweetbay magnolia is a larval host plant for the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) and the Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*). Unfortunately, white-tailed deer will eat foliage and twigs in winter.

Sweetbay grows well in full sun to part shade in acidic, medium to wet soil with good drainage, and tolerates clay and saline soils, moderate drought, and air pollution. It is susceptible to iron chlorosis if grown in alkaline soil.

Few diseases and insect pests attack sweetbay magnolia. Scale insects may infest leaves and branches. Leaf spot can develop during humid periods. Like the bark of other magnolia species, sweetbay bark is thin, and the limbs may be damaged in winter by heavy ice accumulation.

Sweetbay magnolia is the perfect specimen tree for a smaller yard. It is the ideal tree to plant near a patio, deck, or pool and is attractive growing on a stream bank or near a pond. Shrubby versions can serve as a border hedge. Several cultivars are available.

See NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Magnolia virginiana*” and Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Magnolia virginiana*” for specific information on this lovely tree. Clemson Extension HGIC 1015 “*Magnolia*” offers general information on the genus and more detailed data on several species, including sweetbay, star magnolia (*M. stellata*), and cucumber tree (*M. acuminata*.)

In case you are wondering why I am using the botanical or Latin names for all of these trees, the NCSU Plant Toolbox entry lists 12 common names just for sweetbay magnolia. It is easy to purchase the wrong plant if you only have the common name.