

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #27 BLACK GUM (*Nyssa sylvatica*)

Nyssa was a water nymph in Greek mythology, a daughter of Ocean. Members of the genus *Nyssa* do like wet soils, though *Nyssa sylvatica* can grow under almost any water conditions. Black gum has its own family, the Nyssaceae, although it sometimes is included in the dogwood family, Cornaceae.

Black gum's flowers are polygamodioecious— either male or female, with a few perfect exceptions. The greenish-white flowers make up for their modest appearance with excellent nectar. Bees, the main pollinators, produce a pale, distinctive, and delicious tupelo honey. In a neat turnabout, a fallen trunk is sometimes sawed up to make hollow hives, called "bee gums".

Quite early in the Fall, the waxy leaves, with shiny tops and pointed tips, turn deep red. This change— a phenomenon called foliar flagging— signals that the blue-black berries are ripe. A great many migrating birds, such as robins and other thrushes, look for this signal and soon clear out the feast.

Black gum grows best in partial shade. It can survive for decades in the understory, shooting upward if a nearby tree dies and lets in light. But a new study correlating tree range with climate change shows black gum is moving northward while losing ground in the south.

WILDFLOWER #28

Clues: These small yellow flowers shine on shallow river shorelines.

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