

Big Tree for October, 2007
Black Gum/Black Tupelo (*Nyssa sylvatica*)
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While exploring the woods surrounding our suburban home in Amherst, NH, I discovered an odd tree with dark colored cherry-like fruit dangling from drooping branches. But it was not a cherry tree as its leaves were very different from serrated cherry leaves. Its clusters of oval leaves had smooth edges. Also the bark was not like the distinctive shiny bark of cherry trees, but was furrowed in a vertical pattern. Totally puzzled, I decided to attend a tree ID class to learn about my own trees. I stumped the teacher!!!

With further investigation, we learned that it is a tupelo tree that is typically found in swampy areas, bordering ponds or along streams in the

southern part of NH. Its natural range extends from southern Maine to Mexico, and its Latin name is *Nyssa sylvatica*; *Nyssa* is a water nymph in Greek mythology.

Because of its brilliant fall color, the NH Big Tree Committee selected tupelo as its 'Big Tree' for October. It is one of the first trees to turn color in the fall, and its thick, lush foliage explodes with vibrant yellow-orange to deep red hues. Old tupelos can reach heights of 90 feet, and the brilliant color at the tops of these stately trees makes a stunning splash against the clear blue October skies.

In a swampy setting where few other trees survive, tupelos can grow to majestic heights with crowns of distinctive horizontal branches forming high, flat-tops. Old giants often show evidence of wind damage with broken branches, giving them a ragged looking appearance. They can have unusually thick furrowed bark with ridges inches deep on the undersides of the tree trunks; the side that doesn't support snow.

Tupelo trees are among the oldest trees in NH and there is a stand of them in a swamp in Rockingham County that were dated using professional core sampling methods, to be over 560 years old. Another wonderful tupelo swamp full of magnificent old trees is hidden behind a thicket of laurel bushes on conservation land in Amherst. These were

dated to be about 275 years old –about the time the first settlers arrived to the area. Obviously no one had the need to bother harvesting these trees. Besides growing in very difficult locations to access for cutting, the wood of tupelos is very tough and hard to work or split, and has limited uses such as hubs of wheels, and for industrial rollers at the Amoskeag Mills.

Because of their beautiful fall color and toughness they are wonderful trees for home landscapes, although not widely planted. Tupelos have a very deep tap root making them tricky to transplant and are not commonly found in nurseries. When saplings they are a favorite food of deer whose increasing numbers have diminished the forest undergrowth. I did get a seed from our tree to sprout but it didn't survive. I then bought several tiny saplings from a conservation sale. One survived deer browsing, and is now protected by a cage. It is growing very slowly even though it is in the wettest part of our property. But incredibly, I just found several saplings growing under the mother tree in the woods where they are protected by a witch hazel thicket so the deer can't get to them! They seem vigorous and healthy. Sadly I recently I read about another new threat; one of Mother Nature's terrible mistakes. With the resurgence of beavers in NH, they chopped down some grand old giants in a swamp. This is a tricky problem, as beavers are a bit difficult to train! Protective wire fencing around the tupelo trunks might protect them, if the beavers are kind enough to announce their next meal intentions ahead of time!

While admiring the always amazing and incredible NH fall color, look for tupelo trees especially around ponds, along streams or in swamps (binoculars help). If you discover a giant that looks to be at least 3 feet in diameter and about 100 feet tall, visit the NH Big Tree web site at: www.nhbigtrees.org for the complete list champion Big Trees. If you find one that seems bigger than those listed, contact the NH Big Tree State Coordinator, Carolyn Page, carolyn_page@hotmail.com, phone: 664-2934, who will pass the information on to the appropriate county coordinator.

UNH Cooperative Extension and the NH Division of Forests and Lands sponsor the NH Big Tree program in cooperation with the National Register of Big Trees through American Forests.