

## New York City EcoFlora



*Liquidambar styraciflua* L.  
American Sweetgum

**Description:** Tree to about 35 m tall with a conical or broad crown; bark thick, dark brown, rough and platy; twigs corky. Leaves simple, alternate, deciduous, on long petioles; blades palmately 5-lobed (rarely 7-lobed), to about 15 cm wide, the margins finely serrate. Flowers monoecious, staminate inflorescences 5–10 cm long; carpellate flowers numerous in globose heads. Fruit tightly packed capsules, becoming woody, 3–4 cm diam, the two styles hard and sharp-pointed. Seeds 1–2 per capsule, winged, about 3 mm long,

**Where Found:** Connecticut and New York, through much of the southeast to east Texas, also in the mountains of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua; bottomlands. In New York City, naturally occurring American Sweetgum often occur as colonies on rich floodplains, but may also be a pioneer species in diverse conditions. They frequently cultivated in streets, parks and gardens. The species is ranked 6 out of 10 in habitat specificity (0 being the least specific) by the New York Natural Heritage Program.

**Natural History:** The trees are a critical resource for numerous organisms, from fungi to large mammals. American Sweetgums are a larval food source for Luna Moths and thirty-five other caterpillars; Beavers, Mice and Rabbits eat the bark; Deer browse the foliage; Squirrels, Chipmunks and at least twenty-five species of birds eat the seeds. Seed cavities inside the fruit harbor insects that are consumed by hungry birds in winter.

**Cultural History:** Just before his death in 1804, the founding father Alexander Hamilton planted thirteen Sweetgum trees at the Grange, his estate in Harlem, New York. In 2008, the home was moved to its new location a few blocks away in St. Nicholas Park, where his original garden plan was recreated, including the Sweetgum trees. In fall, the leaves turn red, orange, pink and purple, producing some of the most brilliant fall color of any tree. There are many cultivars, some with narrow columnar shapes or those that do not produce fruit.

**Name Notes:** The generic name *Liquidambar* means “liquid amber” for the aromatic resin produced throughout the tree. The epithet *styraciflua* is in reference to styrax or storax balsam, the name applied to medicinal preparations of the resin, especially the Mediterranean species, *Liquidambar orientalis*, also known as the Balm of Gilead.

**Species Notes:** The genus *Liquidambar* was formerly placed in the Hamamelidaceae family along with Witch-hazel, but on the basis of genetic and morphological characters is transferred to the Altingiaceae family consisting of three genera and about twelve species. Sweetgums differ from Witch-hazels in having reduced, unisexual flowers without sepals or petals and wind dispersed seeds. The genus comprises three or more species, one in the Americas, one in Eurasia (*Liquidambar orientalis*) and one or more species in southeast Asia (*Liquidambar formosana*).

**Links:** iNaturalist [observations](#) from New York City. [Specimens](#) from the Mid-Atlantic Herbaria Consortium. Global biotic [interactions](#) from GloBI.