

Tale from the Garden

Just when you think the gardening season is gliding gracefully to a close, nature lays on a stunning last-minute firework display of orange, gold & scarlet leaves to celebrate autumn with a colourful bang! The season is at its most spectacular when seen on a large scale at stately gardens & arboretums, so now's a great time to go visiting. The traditional stars of the show in the Autumn landscape are big trees such as Liquidambar & the Maples – but there are many more.

Since moving to her new home, Katherine A has transformed what was a jungle of weeds & diseased trees at the bottom of her garden, to a landscaped plot with a border of new trees including a striking Liquidambar. Liquidambar or Sweet Gum trees are some of the very best trees for autumn colour, with the foliage turning wonderful vibrant shades of red, orange, yellow and purple.



The star-shaped leaves are reminiscent of Maple leaves but as well as the wonderful aesthetics of the 3 to 7 lobed palmate leaves, the leaves also have a pleasant aroma, especially when crushed. Liquidambar bark is grey with vertical grooves and the flowers are small but appear in dense clusters. The sweet gum flowers bloom from March to May. Each sweetgum flower will grow as a spherical head nestled in an upright cone shaped cluster.



Liquidambar trees produce fruits called 'gumballs' which are woody balls with spikes containing lots of seeds. These spiky little sweet gum pods are full of nutrients making them great food for chipmunks, birds and squirrels. Each of these gum balls contain a cluster of around 60 capsule fruits, and then each fruit holds one or two seeds.

The spikes on these gumballs serve a purpose. They allow the seeds to be carried away by animals! The seeds stick to the animals' fur and they can be carried far and wide. When they fall off they can create new sweetgum trees.

History and Uses of Liquidambar Trees

The common name Sweet Gum comes from the thick sap it produces. Named by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 from the Latin 'liquidus' meaning fluid and the Arabic 'ambar' in reference to the sap which oozes from the bark when wounded. The hardened sap can be chewed like gum and has been used like this for many years in southern parts of the US – one of the earliest versions of chewing gum! Indigenous Americans were the first to use the resin from the sweetgum tree to maintain dental hygiene, because, by chewing the sap, the antiseptic properties make it great for eliminating bacteria from the mouth! And for more dental facts, did you know you can make an effective toothbrush from a twig of the liquidambar *styraciflua*? Explorers in need have been known to cut a twig around four to six inches long, remove any leaves and carefully score one end along the long edge. The scored bits of wood will fray and they can then chew on it for a while to create bristles! They have to brush one tooth at a time with this method, but it's better than nothing, right?

Liquidambar trees were first introduced to the UK by John Bannister, a U.S botanist, in 1681. Bannister was employed by Henry Compton, the Bishop of London, who planted the trees in the Fulham Palace gardens. However, the Spanish naturalist Hernandez was the first European to discover the tree in the early 16th century.

Classed as a hardwood and second only to Oak, the attractive wood of Liquidambar trees has been used for making furniture and baskets, as well as applied as a veneer for plywood. The reddish coloured wood is used as imitation mahogany. The sweetgum tree is known as Alligator Wood in some parts of the American South, this is because the scaly sweetgum bark looks just like the alligator's hide.

Sweetgum trees are considered medium to large, on average they grow to a height of 50 to 70 feet, but in the right conditions they have been known to reach over 100 feet in height. The average diameter of an adult sweetgum tree's trunk is usually somewhere between 24 and 36 inches. Height, sprawling branches and wide leaves combined, these trees are popular in public parks as they create just the right amount of shade. The sweetgum tree won't flower or produce their gum balls for the first 15 to 20 years of growth, but they will go on to live for 150 to 400 years so there is plenty of time!

Used in Chinese Herbal medicine, the spikey fruit called 'lu lu tong' meaning 'all roads open' has been used to promote blood movement, and treating abdominal, back and knee pain.

All roads open ...

If Bethel, a remote city on the western coast of Alaska, is your destination, you will arrive via boat along the Kuskokwim River or arrive by air. Travellers and tourists will note there are no roads leading to Bethel - except one. Each January, tourists and locals cheer on their favourite mushers at the Kuskokwim 300 Sled Dog Race - a nineteen-hour, three-hundred-mile race from Bethel to Aniak and back. It is that snow-packed path used by dog sleds that is the **only** road to Bethel.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14 v6). Jesus did not say, "I am a way." We do not read of Christ proclaiming, "I am one of many ways." There is exclusivity in Jesus' claim. There is no middle ground.

Nicodemus, a religious leader in Jerusalem, paid Jesus a visit by night (John 3 v1-2). Hearing of Jesus' miracles, this well-respected Pharisee greatly desired an audience with Jesus. Nicodemus opened the conversation with a complimentary statement: "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him".

Rather than acknowledge Nicodemus' greeting, Jesus declares that, unless one is born again, he or she will never enter the kingdom of God (John 3 v3). There is only one way to God.

Note Jesus' statement a little later on in His conversation: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3 v16). God's plan of salvation involves His "one and only Son." There is only one road to God.

Maps show us roads and streets – and can help us get from one place to another, especially when we don't know the way. Sometimes we can feel lost in life. Even when we know where we are, we can be confused by problems we face or choices we need to make. Not knowing the right thing to do can make us feel lost inside.

Of course, Jesus isn't a roadmap like we use when driving or going on a mountain walk. He means that following his directions – and living our lives in the way God wants – is the way to Heaven. He's telling us to lead a good life and to follow God's rules.

Where can we learn more about God's rules? God's most special "map" for us is the Bible. That's the reason we use it each week to help us "learn the way." And that way is Jesus.