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Palmetto



The Inky Story of the Dinky Oak Gall ● A Native Celebration ● The Rebirth of Cape Florida

Tupelo Trees in Florida – Richard Moyroud

The name tupelo is derived from the Muskogee word for “swamp tree” and three or four species of tupelo are found in eastern North America, ranging from Central Florida to Canada, and west to Texas. All species seem to prefer moist to wet acidic soils, and often develop swollen trunks in the plant at ground level (for air exchange), a common reaction to flooding. Some species also develop looping roots aboveground, similar to the knee roots formed by cypress trees.

The plants are mostly dioecious, so that male and female flowers are on different trees. Perfect flowers (with both male and female in the same flower) do occur on some plants. The single seeds are held in a fleshy fruit eagerly eaten by birds and other animals. All tupelo trees are in the genus *Nyssa*, in the family Nyssaceae (closely related to the Cornaceae, the Dogwood family.)

The most common and wide-ranging species is *Nyssa sylvatica* (blackgum, sourgum, or pepperidge tree), a tree of mixed forests. It grows tall and straight, and develops a tap root. The fall color of all species is beautiful, with the oblong leaves turning a fluorescent red in the early fall.

Nyssa sylvatica var. *biflora* (swamp tupelo) is the southernmost species found in the United States. This species forms colonies in swamps, growing alongside cypress trees. According to the *Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants*, vouchered specimens of swamp tupelo have been recorded growing as far south as Martin County on Florida's east coast and Lee County on the west coast. Swamp tupelo also grows in western Palm Beach County, where more than 100 trees have grown in Heritage Farms for decades. These trees

flower and fruit every year, providing nectar for bees and food for birds.

Nyssa aquatica (water tupelo) is of special interest since it is tolerant of extreme flooding, in both depth and duration. This species is common in the floodplains of the south, and can endure twenty feet of inundation for extended periods. It is a tall tree with a greatly swollen base, a feature which may provide more stability in wet soils. The irregularly toothed leaves have long petioles.

Nyssa ogeche is the odd plant in the group, but economically the most significant. This species can grow as a large shrub or tree, and is restricted to a small region in northwest Florida and Georgia (along the Ogeechee River, probably its namesake.) The common name Ogeechee lime refers to the large fruit (1.5 inches in size) which has a pleasant acid flavor. It produces large clusters of flowers which are the source of nectar high in fructose, and beekeepers in the native region are the sole source of authentic “Tupelo Honey”, known for its delectable flavor and stability (it does not granulate.)

Although these long-lived native trees supply wood, fruit, and honey, the established ornamental nursery trade has shown little interest in the group. Fortunately, the native nursery industry is producing and selling tupelo trees, and they should be included in most wetland plantings for the benefits they offer.



The purpose of the Florida Native Plant Society is to preserve, conserve, and restore the native plants and native plant communities of Florida.

Official definition of native plant: For most purposes, the phrase Florida native plant refers to those species occurring within the state boundaries prior to European contact, according to the best available scientific and historical documentation. More specifically, it includes those species understood as indigenous, occurring in natural associations in habitats that existed prior to significant human impacts and alterations of the landscape.

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Editorial Content

We have a continuing interest in articles on native plant species and related conservation topics, as well as high-quality botanical illustrations and photographs. Contact the editor for guidelines, deadlines and other information. **Editor:** Marjorie Shropshire, *Visual Key Creative, Inc.* palmetto@fnps.org • (772) 285-4286 • 1876 NW Fork Road, Stuart, FL 34994

FNPS 34TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE
 THURSDAY, MAY 15TH - SUNDAY, MAY 18TH, 2014
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