

Plant of the Week

Liquidambar – Living fossils from North America and from South-east Asia



Liquidambar styraciflua – American Sweetgum

When we think of *Liquidambar*, we think of tall, handsome, deciduous trees, with maple-like leaves that create a medley of rich colours in autumn. This genus was widespread in the northern hemisphere during the Tertiary (60 mya), and some records go back to the Cretaceous (~ 100 mya). Extensive glaciation is believed to have contributed to its demise in Europe and western North America. There are four species of *Liquidambar* in the world today; probably the best known of these is *L. styraciflua* (Sweetgum) from south-eastern North America and Central America. *L. orientalis* (Turkish Sweetgum) is found in the eastern Mediterranean (Turkey, Greece, Rhodes), *L. acalycina* (Chang's Sweetgum) in central and southern China, and *L. formosana* (Chinese Sweetgum) comes from central and southern China, Korea, Taiwan, Laos and Vietnam.

In Sydney, the most commonly planted *Liquidambar* species is the North American Sweetgum. Probably few would recognise the Chinese Sweetgum (枫香树 Fengxiang Shu – Fragrant Maple Tree) but this is also quite widely planted. The two are easy to tell apart: the Chinese Sweetgum has leaves with 3 lobes; the North American Sweetgum has leaves with 5 or more lobes. The fruits are woody capsules aggregated into spiny wooden balls, curious to look at, extremely painful if you walk on them in bare feet. Liquidambar trees are large trees with vigorous roots known to invade and block sewer pipes and crack paving - fine for council parks but plant them in your garden at your peril!



Distribution of *Liquidambar styraciflua* in North and Central America,

Map: modified from Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liquidambar_styraciflua



Liquidambar formosana – Chinese Sweetgum

Alison Downing & Kevin Downing 21.02.2011

(唐爱森, 唐科文 - 2011年2月21日)

Downing Herbarium,
Department of Biological Sciences

