

# Sweetbay Magnolia

*Magnolia virginiana*, most commonly known as **sweetbay magnolia**, or merely **sweetbay** (also swampbay, swamp magnolia, whitebay, or beaver tree), is a member of the magnolia family, Magnoliaceae. It was the first magnolia to be scientifically described under modern rules of botanical nomenclature, and is the type species of the genus *Magnolia*; as *Magnolia* is also the type genus of all flowering plants (magnoliophytes), this species in a sense typifies all flowering plants. Sweetbay is a slow-growing small to medium-sized tree found on wet, often acid soils of coastal swamps and low lands of the Coastal Plains. The soft aromatic straight-grained wood is easily worked and finishes well, so it is much used for veneer, boxes, and containers. Its flowers and foliage make it an attractive landscape tree.

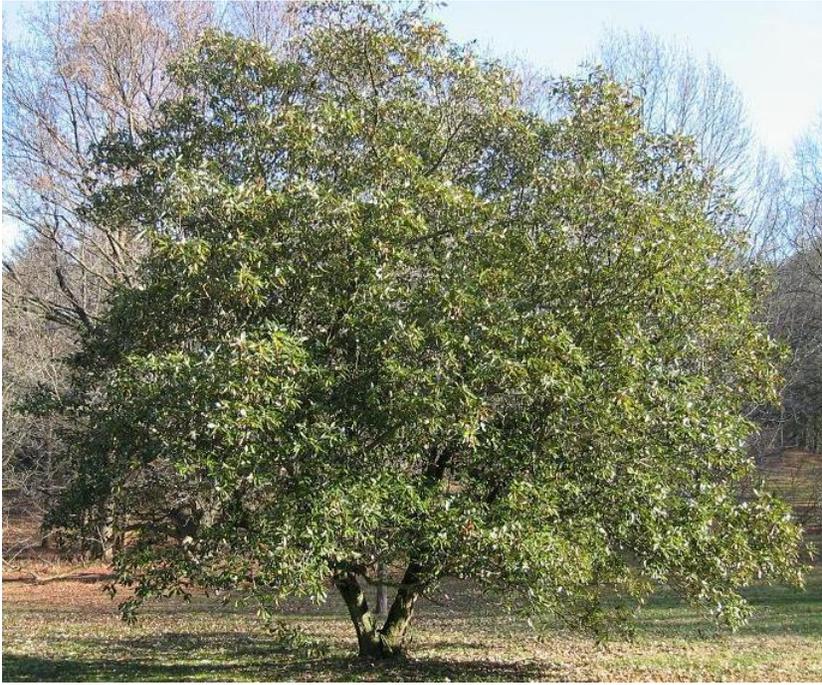


*Magnolia virginiana* is an evergreen or deciduous tree to 90 feet tall, native to the lowlands and swamps of the Atlantic coastal plain of the east-central and south eastern United States. The original native range is thought to be from the eastern Gulf Coast to the lowlands of New Jersey. Whether it is deciduous or evergreen depends on climate; it is evergreen in areas with milder winters in the south of its range (zone 7 southward), and is semi-evergreen or deciduous further north. The leaves are alternate, simple (not lobed or pinnate), with entire margins, 6-8 inches long, and 1-3 inches wide. The bark is smooth and gray, with the inner bark mildly scented, the scent reminiscent of the bay laurel spice.

In the Atlantic and Gulf Coastal Plain, sweetbay is found mainly east of the Mississippi River on sites that are usually moist throughout the year. Sweetbay sites are characterized by acid soils of low base saturation and with poor to very poor drainage and are frequently flooded during the winter or wet seasons. Many sweetbay sites have never been cultivated and represent virgin soils usually with poorly drained soil. Most of the natural range of sweetbay is less than 200 ft above sea level, although some isolated populations exist at higher elevations.



The perfect flowers of sweetbay are fragrant; they are 2 to 3 inches in diameter and 2 inches deep. The flowers carry a very strong vanilla scent that can sometimes be noticed several hundred yards away. Three pale sepals surround six to nine creamy white petals. Inside the cup-shaped corolla are many stamens with purple bases, and within these stamens are many pistils spirally inserted on a spike like receptacle. The flowers are borne singly at the ends of branches and continue to open during a period of several weeks from April into July. Pollination is by insects.



The fruit is an ellipsoid or subglobose aggregate 1 to 2 inches long and 0.5 to 1.25 inches in diameter and consists of many one- or two-seeded follicles. The fruits become ripe from July into October and are dull red, brownish red, or nearly green at maturity. The seeds are black but covered by a thinly fleshy red coat, which is attractive to some fruit-eating birds; these swallow the seeds, digest the red coating, and disperse the seeds in their droppings.

Sweetbay is also a favorite food of deer and cattle. Deer browse the leaves and twigs all year. Cattle utilize sweetbay especially in the winter, when it can account for as much as 25 percent of their winter diet. Analysis of browse samples from Georgia and east Texas indicate that sweetbay contains 10 percent crude protein. The seeds are a favorite food of gray squirrels and are eaten to a lesser extent by white-footed mice, wild turkey, quail, and songbirds