SOURWOOD
OXYDENDRUM ARBOREUM

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Illustrated by Lucile Walton

In the spring we are all so breathless for the first signs of plant life that we savor every bloom and leaf as it opens. Perhaps this is why the early shrubs and trees, shad, redbud, dogwood, maple, etc., are so much better known than the ones which come out later. By midsummer there is such luxury of growth and greenery all over the countryside that individual details of what is blooming sometimes escape unnoticed.

It is a pity, however, that sourwood should pass unnoticed just because it blooms rather late. It is a most attractive tree and well worth our attention. Oxydendrum arboreum, known variously as sourwood, sorrel tree or titi, is a member of the heath family, the Ericaceae, that large and important group in our area which includes the rhododendrons and azaleas, mountain laurel, the blueberries and huckleberries, fetterbush, wintergreen, trailing arbutus and heather itself.

Sourwood grows as a small tree 20-60 feet high. The trunk is straight with slightly ridged, gray-brown bark. The branches are spreading and somewhat pendulous or downward hanging. The alternate leaves are a bright dark green, lance-shaped tapering to a fine point, and have finely serrated edges. In October they turn a brilliant scarlet, making an extremely handsome fall sight. The creamy white flowers are borne in profusion in one-sided clustered racemes or sprays at the ends of the branches of the most recent year's growth. Each flower is tiny, not more than 3/4 inch across, with the special urn shape which is characteristic of a number of members of the Ericaceae, fetter-bush, wintergreen, blueberries and some heathers. Both calyx and corolla are five lobed; there are 10 stamens and a five-celled pistil with a short terminal stigma.

The flowers produce nectar which is keenly sought after by honeybees. From their labors the clear, much prized sourwood honey is produced. In contrast to the nectar, the foliage is acid to the taste and can be chewed to relieve thirst. This acid flavor gives the plant both its common name, sourwood, and its generic name from the Greek oxyz meaning sour, and dendron meaning wood or branch.

The wood of Oxydendrum is heavy, hard and close-grained, quite a light brown in color. It will take a high polish and has been used for tool handles, turned articles and bearings of machinery.

Sourwood is perfectly hardy in the North and is often planted as an ornamental. However, its natural range is mainly in the South from Pennsylvania along the Allegheny Mountains to Florida and Alabama, westward through Ohio to southern Indiana, and southward through Arkansas and Louisiana to the coast. It likes open, well-drained deciduous woodlands, and can be found as high up as 3,500 feet in the mountains. The flowers bloom in June and July and are well worth stopping for, in spite of all the other things that there are for us to admire in the woods at this time of year.

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