

Nyssa Sylvatica – Beetlebung

Frank MacKeever 1968. Native and Naturalized Plants of Nantucket.

Uses: roller for slipping boats into sea; mallet heads, chisel handles, bungs, pestle-like beetle or biddle,

†NYSSACEAE (Sour Gum Family)

†Nyssa L. Pepperidge, Tupelo

N. *sylvatica* Marsh. Black Gum,  
Pepperidge

N. *multiflora* Wang.

(Native) (May–June) (C)

*Note: The Pepperidge is one of the most beautiful trees on Nantucket. Its shiny, dark green leaves turn to crimson in the fall. More consideration should be given to the use of it as a tree for roadsides, lawns, terraces, naturalistic plantings, etc. Many a ship slipped into the sea on rollers made from the tough wood of this tree. And many of the mallet heads and chisel handles which helped to carve out these ships were fashioned from its wood. The casks of whale oil in some of their holds were stoppered with bungs of Pepperidge. At home, the women-folk of the men who sailed these ships were mashing their fruits and vegetables with a pestle-like utensil*

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*which was know to them as a "beetle" or "biddle." The use of the wood, for beetles and bungs, led to the coining of another name for the tree—"Beetlebung." Dr. Richard H. Eyde, of the Department of Botany, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., has published an outstanding and comprehensive study of Nyssa sylvatica, and related species. His monograph appears in the Journal of the Arnold Arboretum, XLIV (1963), 1. I highly recommend its consultation by all who are interested in this genus, and I am grateful to Dr. Eyde for examining and determining the specimens of this Nantucket collection.*