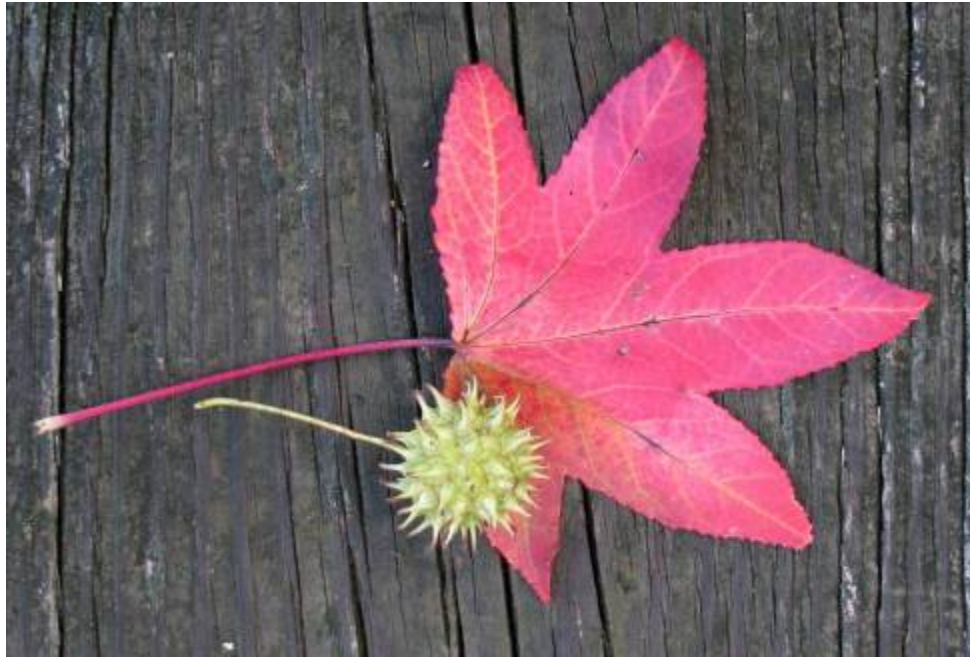


DOWNNS PARK NATURE NOTES



SWEET GUM, STAR OF AUTUMN

Downs Park is home to many sweet gum trees, now displaying their extended show of fall colors. You can find purple, scarlet, orange and yellow – sometimes on the same leaf.

Sweet gums are easily recognized by their long-stemmed, star-shaped leaves and by their spiny seed heads. Rubbing a leaf releases a scent like turpentine.

Most of these native trees grow in the understory of the park's forest, but others soar into the canopy. Some grow along the Bay's shoreline, proving they can tolerate waves, winds and a little saltwater.

The scientific name, *Liquidambar styraciflua*, refers to a gum that oozes from the bark when cut. The gum is used commercially in ointments and syrups. The highly regarded wood goes into a variety of products, from furniture and veneer to plywood.

The trees are rarely bothered by pests or diseases and would make a good choice for the home landscape, provided you don't mind the seed heads, which can make walking difficult. Some gardeners have tried used the prickly balls as cat-proof mulch. The balls are also used in crafts and decorations.

– *Dave Cohn, naturalist volunteer*