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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: As the season turns to fall, keep an eye out for sourwood trees

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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When summer ends and fall begins, this annual meeting times in the Extension world starts. The powers who be usually give us agents a break in the summer to work on projects and possibly take advantage of summer travels when kids are out of school. And in the fall, we get back to it.

Meetings start and I get to spend about a day every couple of weeks heading to either Athens and Watkinsville. Last week it was Washington, Georgia.

It is fun for me, because I like to ride the roads and listen to what is happening in the news all the time watching the landscape. Last week on a trip back from Wilkes County, I spotted some trees that tend to hide away in the landscape until they bloom and start putting on a fiery red display with an early fall color. These trees were right along a stretch of pines peeking through the evergreen needles between Washington and Thomson. They are understory trees that like to stretch themselves for a little extra dab of sunlight and that is when you can spot them. I love this native tree, called sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboretum*).

Sourwood is truly a tree for all seasons. It is one of our most beautiful natives and is ideal as a small specimen tree. It is considered a small- to medium-sized tree, maturing to about 30 feet high with a 20-foot spread.

Grown in the open, sourwood generally has a pyramid shape. Naturally, sourwood can be irregular in its form.

A sourwood has lovely flowers that are tassel like that open in mid to late summer and attract bees, hummingbirds, and other pollinators.

Ever heard of sourwood honey? Well, honeybees love to use this plant as its source for a very distinctive flavor of honey. Birds like warblers love the seed the tree produces.

Campbell Vaughn: The rice fields of Arkansas are amazing and underappreciated

If you can learn to identify sourwood, you can often see it along the roadways heading to the mountains north of us. It is fun to look for because you can see the tree is doing its best to find sun through the gaps in the bigger trees blocking sunlight. When spotting the patches of sourwoods in the woods on your ride, you can then see the distinctive tassel-like flowers and bright fall color that really makes this tree a special plant.

This native tree offers some of the best red fall colors among trees in the South. Fall colors range from red to purple to yellow, and all three colors are often on the same tree.

Sourwood is an exceptional tree for slightly acidic (pH 5.5-6.5), well-drained soils. It can be grown in full sun or partial shade although flowering and fall colors are best in full sun. The tree does reasonably well in dry, neutral soils. This tree will not tolerate dry, compacted soils and is sensitive to root disturbance, so it is not ideal for higher-traffic urban areas. Sourwood has no serious pest problems.

Army worms are everywhere!

If you have Bermuda grass and haven't seen army worms, you aren't looking. They are everywhere.

With the lack of rain, you may just think your grass is brown because it is dry, but I would bet one half of those "dry" yards are eaten up with army worms.

Use a 5-gallon bucket with 2 tablespoons of dish soap and fill with about 3 gallons water and pour the mixture on an area of grass that is between the green grass and brown grass. You will have caterpillars come up. Those caterpillars are fall army worms.

If you see more than four, treat the area with permethrin, bifenthrin, BT or Spinosad.

They can eat a whole Bermuda lawn in a couple of days. We are getting a little late, but if you are attacked by fall army worms now, right after you treat with insecticides put out a light 16-4-8 fertilizer and water it in. Your grass will bounce back quickly. Don't fertilize any later than Sept. 15.

