

SWEETLEAF/HORSESUGAR

Symplocos tinctoria

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Sweetleaf is an unusually attractive shrub or small tree in the spring, with clusters of small, fragrant, cream-colored flowers - the numerous stamens make the blooms particularly showy. The flowers have both male and female parts, but the tree is not self-fertile. Butterflies visit the flowers for nectar in early spring and help with pollination. The flowers are fragrant and are closely spaced on the branches of last season's growth, before the leaves emerge.

Sweetleaf forms a short trunk bearing an open crown of spreading branches. The leaves are long, over 5 inches, narrow, and somewhat leathery with a yellow midvein. The leaves appear evergreen and they may be weakly so, or deciduous, depending upon the climate where the tree grows.

This plant is native chiefly on the Coastal Plain from Delaware and Virginia to Florida and eastern Texas, north in the Mississippi



Valley to Arkansas and Tennessee and inland to the mountains of the Carolinas. Sweetleaf is easily cultivated preferring moist sandy soils in part shade. It can be seen scattered in the understory of woodlands and along streambanks and bottomlands.

The common names Sweetleaf and Horsesugar refer to the sweet, slightly acid taste and odor of the leaves that are commonly eaten by livestock. The sweetness seems variable from plant to plant and is similar to that of green apples. Sweet or not,

the taste is distinctive and is useful when distinguishing this tree from other similar species.

Sweetleaf is also known as Yellowwood for the yellow dye that can be made from the bark and leaves. Early settlers used the bark, and others with aromatic properties, as a tonic. ❖