

Bittersweet Gum Trees

From their back porch overlook, I admired the backyard botanical sanctuary that Teresa and Gerald have laboriously created. Carefully chosen native plants fill the spaces between sinuous footpaths. Weeds have been meticulously excluded, but there it was, a young *Liquidambar styraciflua* maybe 10 feet tall at the edge of a flower bed.

For years I have believed that sweet gums are the biggest weed in God's Creation. "You *are* going to cut down that sweet gum, aren't you?" I prodded Gerald.

"Teresa wants it gone, but I like sweet gum trees. I hope it stays," Gerald replied.

"Why?" I exclaimed. "What's to like about sweet gums?"

I flashed back to my childhood in eastern North Carolina. We had several huge sweet gum trees in our yard. All those spikey balls they drop every year don't decompose quickly. Going barefoot is painful among those prickly spheres. Try to rake them and they just tumble under the tines. Lawn mower blades bat them around. They are unmulchable. Tires and shoes press those balls into the ground making them even more difficult to extract. For punishment, our parents sent us out with five-gallon buckets to pick up sweet gum balls. I forget the crimes, but I cannot forget the unpleasantness of gathering those damned sweet gum balls. God's most prolific weed! I remember burning mounds of the dried sweet gum balls. They blaze briefly and transform into glowing orange-red globes that pale to gray as they become puffs of ashes.

"Sweet gum balls create such a mess," I continued.

"I don't mind the sweet gum balls," Gerald countered. "What harm do those balls do?"

"Plenty," I shot back. "My nine-year old grandson broke his arm when he fell while running over some sweet gum balls on the school playground." I could have argued they're not just a nuisance, they're dangerous!

"They don't contribute much to fall color," I claimed.

Gerald, who generally doesn't let any statement go unchallenged, said, "They have bright yellow leaves in the fall. Some are red, some turn orange, some are purple. I think they're pretty."

Those aren't the colors I associate with sweet gums in the fall. Uninteresting browns, maybe tarnished bronze. My memories are probably tainted by my attitude. Sweet gums are nothing spectacular in comparison to maples or oaks.

My attitude toward sweet gums soured over the years. I swore I'd never own a property infested with sweet gums. Of course, when Tia and I were looking to purchase our first house, we found one that met all our criteria except there were nine sweet gum trees on that acre lot. Nine! "Nein" is German for "no" which should have told us not to buy that house, but did we take the hint? Nein. That's how I knew that house was destined to be ours.

I propagated the family tradition by having my children gather five-gallon buckets of sweet gum balls as atonement for their misdemeanors. In so doing, did I perpetuate a hatred of sweet gums in my progeny?

As a biologist, I love Nature, perhaps not to the point of being disparagingly called a "tree hugger." I know this to be true because while I was away for a January trip with Wofford College students, Tia had those nine sweet gums cut down and hauled away. Although I would not have executed that decision, I was not sad they were gone. Nor were the kids!

Nevertheless, we were still harassed by sweet gums from the neighbor's yard. Those persistent pests continued to torture us for years by dropping their leaves and balls across the fence into our yard.

Gerald continued his defense, "Sweet gums seeds attract purple finches, goldfinches, squirrels, and chipmunks.

There was only one time when I was acutely aware that sweet gum trees produce seeds. It was a beautiful November day in 2014. After spending a week in Neuro Intensive Care, Tia was allowed to come home. She wore a head wrap to cover the half of her scalp which had been shaved for a hole drilled through her skull to relieve the pressure that manifested as a tremendous headache. The doctors didn't/wouldn't tell us what we suspected based on what we read: a rapidly

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growing untreatable brain cancer (glioblastoma) that with surgery and chemo might extend her life for thirteen months.

That sunny afternoon a brilliant blue sky invited us to take our lawn chairs into the backyard just to sit in silence, to be grateful for the thirty-three years we'd had together, and to be grateful for however many days we had left. Both of us were keenly aware that this might be the last time we'd ever sit outside together. (It was.) We did not speak. We did not need to speak.

Just then, a gentle breeze shook the tiny seeds out of those dried brown sweet gum balls that hung across our fence. Thousands of seeds peppered us, making a sound I cannot describe but will never forget, seasoning us for what was to come in the next few weeks. Tia died that December.

Two years after Tia died, I met Mary Helen. We married in 2017. Mary Helen grew up in small town Nashville Georgia, daughter of a family doctor and a nurse.

On the Richbourg family acreage just outside Nashville, sweet gum samplings surge skyward at a pace typical of weeds in fields neglected for only a few weeks in the spring. I slaughtered hundreds of them in June 2026 when I cut the meadows for the first time after Mary Helen's father died in October. I felt a blend of satisfaction and sadness to see them disappear beneath the orange Kubota diesel tractor. They left no trace in the shredded green vegetation that formed a wake behind the bright red Bushhog. But their canopied elders who survived Hurricane Helene witnessed the infanticide, silently vowing vengeance in every coming year. They will hurl sweet gum balls and seeds long after the Kubota and I have been silenced.

Maybe I should rethink my relationship with sweet gum trees. Gerald might be right. Maybe they deserve more appreciation. Maybe I should acknowledge their persistence, their resilience, their fecundity. I vow to look more carefully in October and November. I hope to see yellows, oranges, reds and purples that Gerald sees. If I never experience another shower of seeds, at least I have the indelible memory of that special time with Tia when transitions were forthcoming.

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I am grateful for that afternoon when our neighbor's sweet gum trees gave us a benediction, a bittersweet bookend to the rice that was tossed on us the day we were married.

GR Davis Jr

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