Other Common Names: Lily-Of-The-Valley Tree, Sorreltree, Titi.

Family: Ericaceae.

Cold Hardiness: Cold tolerant in the upper Midwest and Northeast to USDA zone 5 using northern provenances, but the more heat tolerant southern sources can be grown into USDA zone 8 (9a).

Foliage: Deciduous simple alternate leaves are 4” to 8” long by 1½” to 4” wide, elliptic-ovate in outline with broadly acute to nearly rounded bases, acute to short acuminate tips, finely serrated margins, and a lightly impressed midrib and main lateral veins; leaves tend to be glabrous dark green, sometimes lustrous above, duller beneath where there are sometimes sparse hairs; foliage turns beautiful scarlet red, maroon or wine red colors in early autumn; stipules are lacking; petioles are short and yellow-green to green in color.

Flower: Showy few branched 6” to 10” long terminal panicles of tiny, ¼” to ½” long, fragrant flowers are produced in early (south) to late (north) summer; five white to creamy white petals are fused into an inverted urn-shaped corolla; flowers have fine sparse short white hairs on the exterior and are subtended by five triangular green bracts; individual flowers are held on peduncles half to slightly longer than the rest of the flower; flower panicles are often borne in a picturesque downward sweeping ski-slope shaped fashion, showing to strong advantage on the exterior of the canopy; urns may be turned more upright on downward sloping panicles; the late flowering of this tree makes the flowers even more noticeable than they might be in the spring rush of flowering trees and shrubs; flowers are also a bee favorite.

Fruit: Small brown ovoid to urn-shaped capsules contain numerous seeds; fruit mature in summer to early fall, but are retained into winter when seed is dispersed; fruits are not particularly ornamental.

Stem / Bark: Stems — stiff mostly glabrous stems are green to red becoming gray-brown with shallow almost circular leaf scars subtending the buds; Buds — only lateral buds are present; the small, ₁⁄₁₆” to ₁⁄₈”, few scaled imbricate buds are set partially within a small shelf formed by the edge of the leaf scar; Bark — trunks tend to be rather slender with mature bark ridged and furrowed, eliciting an almost corky appearance; younger trunks are smooth gray with orangish brown fissures becoming dark gray and more deeply fissured at maturity.

Habit: When open grown habits tend to be strongly upright in youth, sometimes nearly columnar, becoming more of an upright oval to conical canopy at maturity; in competition and without some corrective pruning in the nursery, canopies are more irregular; trees are typically considerably taller than wide; overall textures are medium to medium-coarse, but not harshly so; the deciduous winter silhouette can be almost spire-like; 15’ to 20’ mature sizes are typical in extreme eastern and northeastern portions of our region, but it can reach 30’ to 40’ (75’) in its more favorable native haunts.

Cultural Requirements: Not the world’s easiest tree to grow; Sourwood requires an acidic soil with regular moisture and good drainage; high pH soils, salinity, alkalinity, air pollution, soil compaction, poorly drained soils, root disturbance and extended drought are not tolerated; plants perform best with humusy acidic soils and an available good quality irrigation water; in more mesic locations, trees can tolerate full sun, but in much of our region they benefit from light shade, ala a woodland edge tree; transplant is difficult and best from containers; avoid cultivation under the root zone as roots tend to be fibrous and located near the soil surface.

Pathological Problems: Leaf spots can sometimes disfigure the foliage in humid environments; sphinx moth will feed on the foliage; deer may browse it heavily.

Ornamental Assets: Oxydendrum arboreum is imbued with outstanding ornamental characteristics and multi-season interest where it can be grown; spring and early summer foliage is a fresh green, fall colors can be outstanding, the late season flowering is showy, and the upright growth form is unique.

Limitations & Liabilities: Providing the somewhat demanding cultural conditions necessary for vigorous growth can be a challenge; overall growth rates are slow, necessitating patience for mature effects to be manifested.

Landscape Utilization: A woodsy cousin, ill befitting city living. O. arboreum is best reserved for park and estate use in urban/suburban areas; an outstanding tree for use along woodland edges and naturalized pathways, this species fares poorly in harsh urban environments; this is one of the most prized native species as a honey tree.

Other Comments: A small native tree with outstanding ornamental features, O. arboreum is well worth the effort where it can be effectively grown; unfortunately it is not the easiest plant to grow successfully and should only
be attempted on well drained acidic soils in the eastern portion of our region; the common name of sourwood refers to the sour or acrid taste of the foliage; the genus name derives from the Greek words oxys for sour and dendron for tree, likewise the specific epithet means tree-like.

**Native Habitat:** Sourwood is native to the Eastern United States, extending westward into Louisiana and perhaps Arkansas; although not native to Texas or eastern Oklahoma it is sometimes planted there in cultivated landscapes and is occasionally reported to naturalize in Northeast Texas.

**Related Taxa:** *Oxydendrum* (L.) A.P. de Candolle is a monotypic genus but is in the same subfamily as *Vaccinium*.

**References:** Dirr, 2009; Ellias, 1980; Odenwald and Turner, 1996; Sternberg and Wilson, 2004.

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