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## Botanical Focus: A series of articles on the flora of the Cooks Creek Watershed

### A Seldom-used Native Tree with Year-Round Interest (*Oxydendrum arborium*)

By Alan Miller

*Oxydendrum arboreum*, a small flowering tree of the eastern United States, is commonly called sourwood, sorrel tree, or lily of the valley tree. It is a member of the heath and heather family — Ericaceae — along with azaleas and rhododendrons, pieris, leucothoe, enkianthus, mountain laurel (*kalmia*), the native American fruiting shrubs cranberry and blueberry (*vaccinium*), and many others. Like several of its relatives, its flowers are small urn shaped blossoms borne on panicles, strongly resembling the lily family spring perennial Lily of the Valley. In our area the bloom occurs in late June or early July when few other flowering trees are blooming. Michael Dirr, in his Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, says the blooms “smother the foliage, remind of a lacy veil.” As the blossoms dry and fall, the fruit—which looks much like the flowers—remains on the panicles during the fall color period and through the winter.



*Oxydendrum* is a monotypic genus—botanical language for the only one—so there is no European or Asian example. Several European gardens prize our tree, but it is not well known here. Its native habitat is well-drained somewhat acidic ridges from coastal North Carolina and western Florida and the Gulf coast to Louisiana then north to Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. It is hardy at least to zone 5 so cold temperatures here are no problem. Its typical habit, or conformation, is upright oval to upright-rounded pyramidal. Both its branches and flower racemes are pendulous, giving an elegant, almost manicured appearance. The alternate oval leaves are dark green, shiny and somewhat leathery and are very resistant to pest or disease discoloration. Their fall color is spectacular, ranging from fire engine red to a mixture of orange, red, and purple. With its persistent fruits in fall resembling blossoms, *Oxydendrum* looks like it is blooming and in fall color simultaneously in the mid to later autumn depending on the level of sunlight at the tree's site. It is one of the most beautiful of our fall trees—unmistakable once one knows what to look for. The smooth and grey bark of its youth becomes increasingly furrowed with age until it forms almost rectangular plates like the bark of the persimmon. This takes a long time and *Oxydendrum* is not a rapidly growing tree. It is, however, very rewarding even when small and deserves consideration in sunny or partially shaded well-drained sites both formal and naturalized. It is an ideal specimen, looks wonderful in front of evergreens, and makes a lovely grouping or copse. With a little work, *Oxydendrum* is available locally and transplants readily when young because of its fibrous root system. A person can fall in love with this tree; it is rewarding in every season.



Sourwood Honey – Sourwood honey is collected in the mountain areas of the Carolinas where it has a large local following. This honey has a medium amber color, does not crystallize, and has a definite sour and tart quality. The beehive supers are added at the beginning of blossom time and removed at the end of bloom. Sourwood honey is often mixed with tulip tree honey whose flow occurs before that of sourwood. The shiny green leaves of sourwood, if chewed, have a very sour taste—similar to sour green apples.