

The Black Tupelo Tree

Kenosha County

A very rare black tupelo tree inspired a bit of detective work on the part of two naturalists who finally tracked it down. Early botanists had recorded two such trees in 1909 in Somers Woodlot, located in Somers Township, Kenosha County. Apparently this small wooded area contained a community of about eight species of hardwoods. Yet it was not until May 1965, 56 years later, that the naturalists rediscovered a single tupelo tree (sometimes called sour gum, black gum or pepperidge).

In the 1909 reference work, the author of "Flora of Racine and Kenosha Counties" reported the tupelo trees growing "within a stone's throw of the P.O. at Berryville, Kenosha County ... the only trees of their kind known in the state." Botanists were interested because proof of this rare tree's existence would extend considerably its known northern range.

It took several tries for Phil Sander and Henry Otterson, both of Kenosha, to find the site of the old

woodlot, but the two large black tupelo trees were gone. They believed the single young tree to be an offshoot. It was growing on the north side of Sixth Place and Sheridan Road in Berryville. In the late 1970s, botanists discovered several younger tupelo trees in the same woodlot. An interesting characteristic of these trees is the oval, berry-like drupes, about a third of an inch long and blue-black when ripe.

Adding to the mystery of the tupelos is the speculation about how they came to be growing in Wisconsin. One theory holds that perhaps the seeds of the trees were transported in the crops of the once-numerous passenger pigeons as they migrated from southern climes through Wisconsin, using the nearby Pike River Valley flyway and feeding grounds featuring their favorite food, acorns.

Source: Phil Sander, Kenosha