Hi, this is Barbara O’Hare from the Eastern Shore Master Naturalists. Do you like the many sweetgum trees we have here on the shore, or are you frustrated by all those prickly seed balls that scatter the ground during the Fall? Seems that the sweetgum tree has friends and foes.

Sweetgum trees can be beautiful, especially when their star-shaped leaves turn all shades of red, gold and rust. But they are also prolific producers of seeds. It takes 2o to 30 years for them to begin producing seeds, but once they start, they can keep going for at least 150 years! The seed globes are actually made up of many seed capsules. One, spiky “gum ball” can contain upward of 50 seeds. The seed balls start out green, and as they dry, the capsules open to release the seeds.

The sweetgum is native to the Eastern Shore, and the trees quickly populate old farm fields and logged areas. The tree’s botanical name is *Liquidambar styraciflua* (lick-wid-AM-ber sty-rass-ih-FLOO-uh). The wood and the gold sap of the tree have important commercial uses. Sweetgum is one of the most important commercial hardwoods in the Southeastern United States. Its wood is bright reddish brown, heavy, straight, satiny, and close-grained, but not strong. The wood does not have the value of other common hardwoods such as pine, oak or maple. The wood **is** used to make veneer, plywood, cabinets, and furniture.

The sap, or gum, from the trees also has valuable commercial use, in medicines and salves. The gum resin has anti-inflammatory properties and is found in different products to treat various ailments, including skin problems. Native American Cherokee tribes applied resin from the tree to treat wounds. In addition, the sap is used to produce a tincture to help bandages stick to the skin.

Another important value, especially here on the Shore, is to provide habitat for birds and animals. Our native birds and small mammals, such as squirrels, depend on the sweetgum trees. Flocks of migrating goldfinches will feed on the tiny gum ball seeds in their flight south.

So, the sweetgum tree provides important benefits to us all. You may not like the prickly gumballs under your feet but try to think of them more kindly. Use them as fire starters to add a blue glow to the flames or make a craft such as a wreath or ornament. Some folks even use them as garden mulch to keep critters away.

So our native sweetgum provides many benefits, as well as its beautiful foliage and sometimes annoying sweet gum balls. I hope I have given you a new appreciation for this common tree. Enjoy our great outdoors!