Here's a Green Christmas tip: Use sweet-gum balls as packing material—but zap them first.

Send them Packing

Story and Photos
By Joe McFarland

It's a crushing dilemma every Christmas: What's the best way to ship that jar of homemade preserves without fear of breakage? Glass jars are fragile, and it seems no amount of crumpled newspaper or shipping "peanuts" can withstand the sometimes-brutal forces of package delivery services.

The too-common result: That prized jar of hand-picked blackberry jam, or home-raised honey or backyard-boiled maple syrup gets delivered as a shattered, dripping mess. Christmas is ruined. Enemies are made.

Meanwhile, there's that seemingly unrelated, post-autumn scourge of tree lovers: How to get rid of a yard full of "gum balls" that fell from sweet gum trees during autumn?

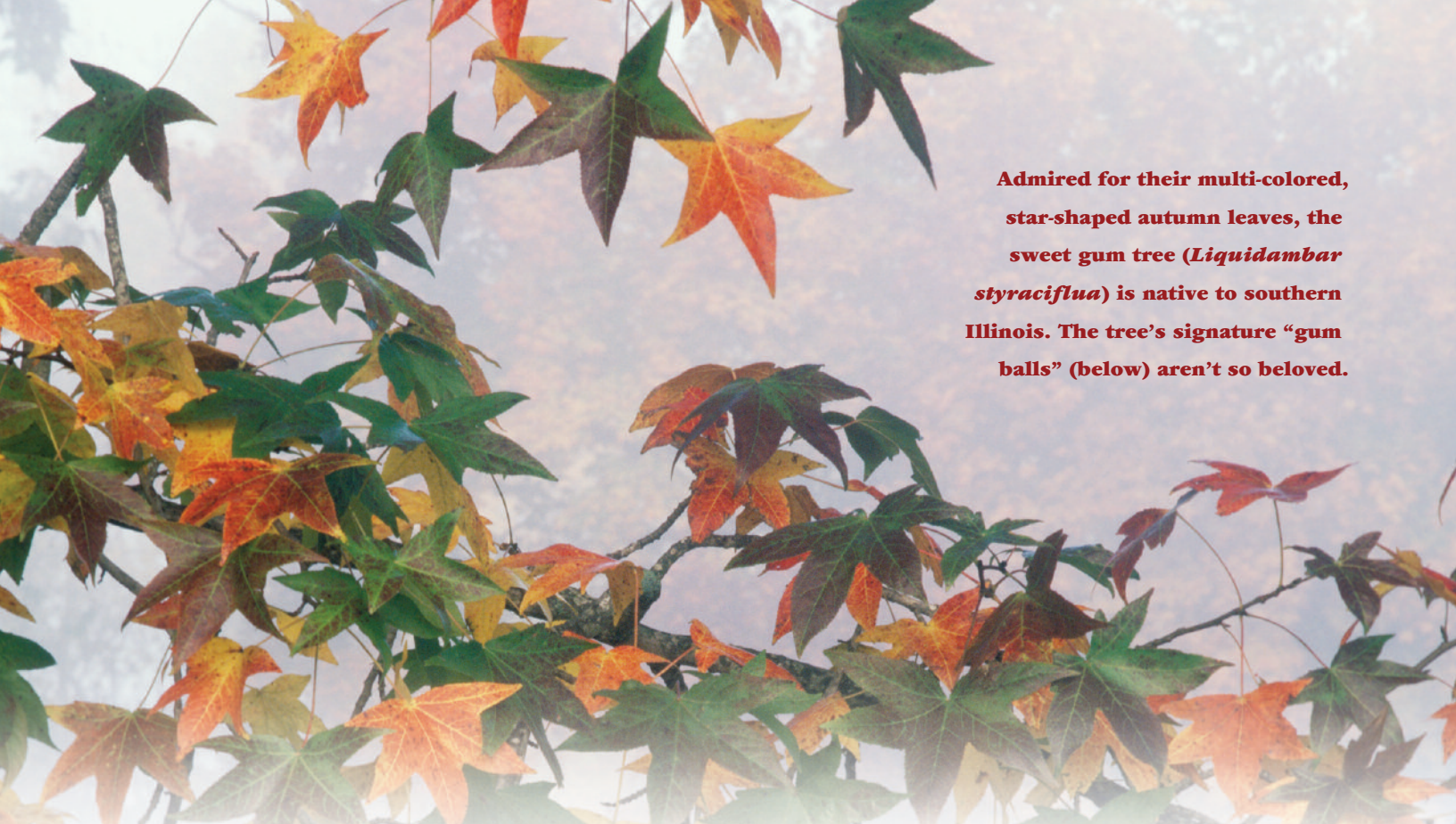
There is a connection. While mankind has yet to invent the perfect packing material for glass jars, Mother Nature isn't so easily stumped or broken. Those piles of sweet gum balls you raked and plucked from your yard provide a Green—and perfectly designed—cushion for fragile shipments during the holidays.

For anyone who's ever stepped on one, the shock-absorbing property of those spiny spheres is legendary. The

For a wild holiday gift alternative, ship fragile jars of goodies with nature's nearly crush-proof packing material.

fruiting bodies of sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*, a native tree of southern Illinois that's also planted as far north as Chicago) roll defiantly under the boot of even a heavy adult without being damaged. Many twisted ankles and prat falls can be blamed on these seemingly indestructible, seed-bearing shells that refuse to be crushed flat—even under a car tire.

Therefore, in this age of organic solutions, why not take advantage of



Admired for their multi-colored, star-shaped autumn leaves, the sweet gum tree (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) is native to southern Illinois. The tree's signature "gum balls" (below) aren't so beloved.

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

nature's perfect engineering to ship fragile jars of goodies safely? You'll want to heat the gum balls first (more about that in a moment) to kill potential and unintentional introductions of exotic species elsewhere. But a glass jar packed snugly in a box of gum balls will—barring a sledgehammer—deliver the gift safely and with a message of environmental responsibility.

The necessary disclaimer: The use of plant materials for shipping filler and packaging isn't new, and there's a long and notorious history of disastrously invasive species outbreaks linked to such practices.

"The invasive plant *Microstegium vimineum*, commonly called Japanese stilt grass, probably arrived in the United States when it was used as packing material from China," Department of Natural Resources botanist Jody Shimp pointed out. But even as he warns about the risks of shipping viable plant material, Shimp offers a peer-approved method for safely sending gum balls afar.

He explained how plant experts kill hitchhiking insects and "sterilize" seeds of potentially harmful species through a quick zap in the microwave.

"Herbarium specimens are put in the microwave before being stored to eliminate the risk of insects or the plant spreading wherever the specimens travel," he said.

And while the sweet gum tree isn't known to pose an invasive species risk in North America, zapping the gum balls for about 90 seconds in the microwave before piling them into a box effectively kills the tiny seeds.

Here's a fragrant bonus: As the common name implies, the sweet gum tree produces a gum that exudes a pleasantly aromatic scent when heated. And as you microwave batches of organic shipping material, your kitchen will be filled with a spicy holiday scent. Not only will your mood be uplifted by your environmentally clever use of sweet gum balls as crush-resistant packing filler, you can finally feel good about yard waste.

Best of all, your friends and family will think you're doing your part to go Green as you trick them into accepting your "gift" from nature.

Often maligned for their rough spines and irritating persistence in yards, seed-bearing 'gum balls' should be zapped in the microwave before being shipped.