



Alabama's *TREASURED Forests*
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Fringetree

(*Chionanthus virginicus*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

When fringetree is in bloom, masses of snow-white flowers against the delicate greens of new spring growth are among the most beautiful sights in our Southern forests. Like other beloved native plants, it has many names, including old man's beard; grancy graybeard, and white ash. Fringetree can be found in the wild from New Jersey to central Florida, and west to Arkansas and Eastern Texas. In Alabama it is found nearly throughout the state, mostly in the midstory of rich, moist forested sites.

Most often seen as large deciduous shrubs, fringetrees can be pruned and trained into small, well-formed trees with a potential height of about 25 feet. The leaves are opposite, oblong to oval, up to about 8 inches long, and 3 inches wide. The bark is gray-brown, eventually becoming somewhat scaly with age. In April or May, flowers are small and fragrant, with four strap-like petals in showy 4- or 5-inch panicles.

Fringetree belongs to a large and famous family. Close relatives include ash trees, in the genus *Fraxinus*, and Olive, *Olea europaea*, one of the most ancient and economically important of the world's cultivated plants. Other family relations are the exotic privets, in the genus *Ligustrum*, which are often used as hedge plants. Several of these have established themselves outside of cultivation, and one species, Chinese privet, *Ligustrum sinense*, has become one of the most destructive invasive exotics on roadsides and in tree plantations and natural habitats in the eastern United States.

Our beautiful fringetree is a good citizen, and it would be seen even more often in our gardens if it were not somewhat difficult to cultivate commercially. Stem cuttings are reluctant to root, and the seeds should be "stratified" – exposed to two separate

cold treatments to enhance germination. These difficulties can be overcome, but they do somewhat limit the availability of these beautiful landscape plants.

The bark and roots of *Chionanthus* have been used by Southeastern Indians as a poultice to treat boils and wounds. Tea made from the bark is often listed in old herbals as a diuretic, to stimulate water loss, and as a treatment for a variety of fevers. The ripe fruits are a little less than an inch long, oval, blue-black when ripe, with a single large pit. They look very much like small olives, which is not surprising, given their family relations. In fact, the fruits have been brined and used as olives!

The best use of our beautiful native fringetrees is in the landscape, where their masses of snowy-white flowers will remind us of the beauty that surrounds us in the fields and forests of Alabama and the Southeast. The Alabama state champion *Chionanthus virginicus* is a giant in Tuscaloosa County, with a trunk 29 inches in circumference, 18 feet tall, and an average crown spread of 31 feet. 🌳



Photos by Fred Nation