Chionanthus virginicus
Fringetree

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

INTRODUCTION

It is hard to think of a more beautiful, small tree than Fringetree when it is in full bloom (Fig. 1). The upright oval to rounded form adds dark green color in summer, bright white flowers in spring. The pure white, slightly fragrant flowers, emerging just as the dogwood flowers fade, hang in long, spectacular panicles which appear to cover the tree with cotton for two weeks. As with other white flowered trees, they look best when viewed against a dark background.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: Chionanthus virginicus
Pronunciation: kye-oh-NANTH-us ver-JIN-ih-kuss
Common name(s): Fringetree, Old-Mans-Beard
Family: Oleaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 3 through 9 (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America
Uses: container or above-ground planter; wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; narrow tree lawns (3-4 feet wide); specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

DESCRIPTION

Height: 12 to 20 feet
Spread: 10 to 15 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms
Crown shape: oval; round
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: slow
Texture: medium
**Foliage**

- **Leaf arrangement:** opposite/subopposite; whorled (Fig. 3)
- **Leaf type:** simple
- **Leaf margin:** entire
- **Leaf shape:** oblong; obovate
- **Leaf venation:** pinnate; reticulate
- **Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous
- **Leaf blade length:** 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches
- **Leaf color:** green
- **Fall color:** yellow
- **Fall characteristic:** not showy

**Fruit characteristics:**
- attracts birds; no significant litter problem; persistent on the tree; showy

**Trunk and Branches**

- **Trunk/bark/branches:** bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; not particularly showy; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns
- **Pruning requirement:** needs little pruning to develop a strong structure
- **Breakage:** resistant
- **Current year twig color:** brown; green; gray
- **Current year twig thickness:** medium; thick

**Culture**

- **Light requirement:** tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in the shade; tree grows in full sun
- **Soil tolerances:** clay; loam; sand; acidic; occasionally wet; well-drained
- **Drought tolerance:** moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: none

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: little, if any, potential at this time
Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Dark green, glossy leaves emerge later in the spring than those of most plants just as the flowers are at peak bloom. This differs from Chinese Fringetree which flowers at the terminal end of the spring growth flush. Female plants develop purple-blue fruits which are highly prized by many birds. Fall color is yellow in northern climates, but is an unnoticed brown in the south, with many leaves dropping to the ground a blackened green. The flowers can be forced into early bloom indoors.

The plant eventually grows 20 to 30 feet tall in the woods, spreads to 15 feet, and tolerates city conditions well. But trees are more commonly seen 10 to 15 feet tall in landscapes where they are grown in the open. It forms as a multi-stemmed round ball if left unpruned but can be trained into a small tree with lower branches removed. Although reportedly difficult to transplant, Fringetree can be successfully moved quite easily with proper care. Could be used beneath power lines where no pruning would be required.

Fringetree looks best in a sunny spot sheltered from wind. The foliage appears more attractive when grown with several hours of shade but the tree blooms best in full sun. Probably best overall with some afternoon shade. A North American native commonly found in upland woods and stream banks throughout most of the South, Fringetree prefers moist, acid soil and will gladly grow in even wet soils. It grows very slowly, usually 6 to 10 inches per year, but can grow a foot per year if given rich, moist soil and plenty of fertilizer. There is only one flush of growth each year.

Chionanthus pygmaea (Pygmy Fringetree) is native to central Florida and is considered an endangered plant. It produces nice flowers and grows to only eight feet tall.

Pests

Scale can be controlled with horticultural oil sprays.

Mites are pests in full sun locations.

Diseases

Leaf spots can be caused by several genera of fungi. Most years, the leaf spots are not a problem and there is no cause for control, but they can cause premature defoliation and spoil fall color display.

Powdery mildews of different genera may attack Fringetree.

Stem cankers can girdle stems.