

Leon Counties Adopt-a-Tree Program



Photo to be credited to David W. Marshall, UF-IFAS Extension in Leon County : Chionanthus virginicus

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This year the Leon County Adopt-a-Tree Program is planning on using the fringe-tree. The ethereal spring bloom of the fringe-tree qualifies this plant as one of North America 's most beautiful small flowering trees.

Fringe-tree's showy bloom delights any who visit this plant's native habitats along streams, small rivers and as it's name implies the fringe of the forest.

If you are not familiar with this tree it may be that you know it by another name as it has many common names. Some common names include fringe-tree, grancy gray beard, gray beard tree, snowdrop tree, snowflower, white fringe, white fringe-tree, old-man's-beard, granny gray-beard, and flowering-ash, American fringetree. Fortunately it has only one scientific name which is (*Chionanthus virginicus*). The genus is a member of the Olive Family. Interestingly the literal translation of the genus name, *Chionanthus*, which is latinized Greek, is snow flower, a reference to the graceful appearance of the snow-white flowers.

Fringe-tree is a large shrub or small tree that grows to about 20 ft high. The plant is open in habit with the spread often exceeding its height. The trunk is short, with branches forming close to the ground. It has opposite, deciduous, elliptical dark green glossy leaves. The bark is gray to light brown and smooth on new branches but becomes narrowly ridged at maturity.

The plant's crowning feature is its abundant production of very showy, white flowers with narrow straplike petals that appear at the same time as the foliage. The flowers are dioecious, meaning that they are either staminate (male, pollen-bearing) or pistillate (female, capable of setting seeds). Occasionally, both male and female flowers are found on the same tree. Reportedly, plants bearing male flowers are more ornamental in spring than those with female flowers. Fringe-tree flowers at an early age and is attractive to a variety of insects while in bloom. The flowers have a delicate sweet perfume. SEQ CHAPTER \h r 1

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The fruits ripen in late summer or early fall. The dark blue to nearly black, egg-shaped fruits are marked by a white, powdery bloom and contain a single seed. The fruits are 0.6 to 1 inch long and are borne in clusters that may be hidden by leaves. The fruits are attractive to a variety of wildlife, including many songbirds, white-tailed deer, quail, and turkeys. Male plants must be in the vicinity of females to allow abundant fruit set.

Traditionally, a tonic was produced from the bark, and it was used as a diuretic and to reduce fevers. While the wood is hard, close-grained, and moderately heavy, it was never used commercially.

Fringe-tree does well in full sun but as its name implies, this native tree does well in the partial shade it receives from being on the fringe of a forest. This is why you can often find this tree growing abundantly on the edge of a forest along streams and small rivers. It prefers moist, well drained situations but is also tolerant of droughty conditions.

Frequently cultivated for its ornamental value, fringe-tree is used as a free standing specimen. In late winter and early spring its showy fringe-like blooms cascade downward like the white beard of a wise old man inspiring many of its common names including grancy greybeard.

If you decide you want a fringe-tree the county will plant one tree per household, between your house and the road outside the city limits. To let the county know you want a tree, Leon County Right-of-Way Management Superintendent, Tom Jackson says to follow the instructions from one of the ads that will appear in the Tallahassee Democrat in December. If you let them know you want a tree, they will instruct you to put a wooden stake where you want the tree. If there is no stake, the county will pick a good spot. Remember, these should be watered regularly for the first year.

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