

# *Chionanthus virginicus*: Fringetree<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

It is hard to think of a more beautiful small tree than fringetree when it is in full bloom. The upright oval to rounded form reaches 12 to 20 feet in height and adds dark green color in summer and 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:** 3A through 9B (Figure 1)

**Origin:** native to southeastern and south central United States; as far north as New Jersey

**UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status:** native

**Uses:** container or planter; specimen; deck or patio; street without sidewalk; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft. wide; highway median

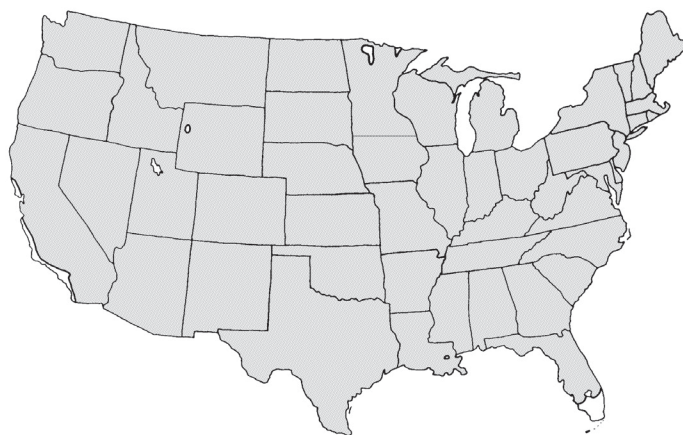


Figure 1. Range

## Description

**Height:** 12 to 20 feet

**Spread:** 10 to 15 feet

**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical

**Crown shape:** oval, round

**Crown density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** slow

**Texture:** medium

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## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** opposite/subopposite

**Leaf type:** simple

**Leaf margin:** entire

**Leaf shape:** obovate, oblong

**Leaf venation:** pinnate, reticulate

**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous

**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches, 4 to 8 inches

**Leaf color:** yellow green and glossy on top, paler green underneath

**Fall color:** yellow

**Fall characteristic:** not showy



Figure 2. Leaf—*Chionanthus virginicus*: Fringetree

## Flower

**Flower color:** white/cream/gray

**Flower characteristics:** very showy; fragrant; emerges in cluster on stalks

**Flowering:** spring

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** oval, round

**Fruit length:**  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch

**Fruit covering:** fleshy drupe

**Fruit color:** dark blue to black

**Fruit characteristics:** attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Fruiting:** late summer



Figure 3. Flower—*Chionanthus virginicus*: Fringetree

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/branches:** branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

**Bark:** reddish brown and smooth, with raised leaf scars when young, turning lighter gray, rougher, and scaly with age

**Pruning requirement:** little required

**Breakage:** resistant

**Current year twig color:** gray, brown, green

**Current year twig thickness:** medium, thick



Figure 4. Bark—*Chionanthus virginicus*: Fringetree





Figure 5. Lenticils—*Chionanthus virginicus*: Fringetree  
Credits: Gritta Hasing, UF/IFAS

## Culture

**Light requirement:** full sun, partial sun, or partial shade; shade tolerant

**Soil tolerances:** clay; sand; loam; acidic; occasionally wet; well-drained

**Drought tolerance:** moderate

**Aerosol salt tolerance:** none

## Other

**Roots:** not a problem

**Winter interest:** no

**Outstanding tree:** yes

**Ozone sensitivity:** unknown

**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** unknown

**Pest resistance:** resistant to pests/diseases

## 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 pygmaeus* (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.

## Reference

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. *Trees: North & Central Florida*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.