



White Fringetree - *Chionanthus virginicus*

This small deciduous tree or shrub from the Oleaceae (Olive) family is common to the Southeastern United States exhibiting hardiness in zones 3-9. The tree bears fragrant spring blooms (May) which feature airy terminal 6 to 8 inch drooping clusters of fringe-like creamy white petals. Separate male and female plants are a noteworthy characteristic though there may be perfect flowers on the same plant. The male flowers are showier as they are longer than the female flowers however the female flowers give way to clusters of olive-like fruits which ripen to a dark blue in the late summer. In the fall, the spear-shaped leaves turn yellowish-green to golden-yellow.

The tree grows at a slow to moderate rate topping at 12- 20 feet in height (35 feet in the wild) as well as in diameter with a spreading variable shape that requires little maintenance. Light preference of the fringetree is sun to partial shade. Fringetree is most often found in understory areas with rich moist woods and hillsides, moist stream banks, limestone glades and rocky ledges. While the tree prefers well-drained soil it can tolerate clay, sandy, loam or acidic soil. The fringetree also tolerates air pollution. Roots are not a problem so the tree can be planted in an urban setting near sidewalks or roads either as a specimen or en masse as a border. No serious insect or disease problems have been noted though it may be susceptible to scale and borers. The fringetree does not tolerate road salt.

Some references note that the dried root and bark of the fringetree are used in traditional American folk medicine to make tonics for liver and gallbladder disorders. Others use portions of the tree to treat fevers, as an external poultice, or as a diuretic. Note, you should consult with a physician before attempting to try any medicinal treatments involving the fringetree on yourself or others.

Birds and other wildlife seek the fruit of the fringetree. White-tailed deer and rodents eat the fruit that has fallen to the ground. It has been reported that 75 species of birds favour the fruit including the Northern Cardinal, Eastern Bluebird, Blue Jay, Wild Turkey, Pileated Woodpecker and Brown Thrasher. The pollinators of the flowers are reported to be bees. Larvae of several moths feed on the leaves of the tree including the Fringetree Sallow, Fall Webworm, Waved Sphinx, Rustic Sphinx and the Fawn Sphinx.

Although the white fringetree is native from southern Pennsylvania south to Florida and west to Texas it is listed as a threatened species in Pennsylvania. The 2007 edition of *Plants of Pennsylvania* by Rhoads and Block notes that the tree is "rare in moist woods." Propagation of the tree requires patience due to its double dormancy thus if seeds are sown in the fall they will not germinate until the second spring. Growing the tree from a cutting is not recommended.



Male flower



Female flower



Leaf



Mature fruit



Winter twig



Mature bark



Spring



Summer



Fall



Winter



Range map