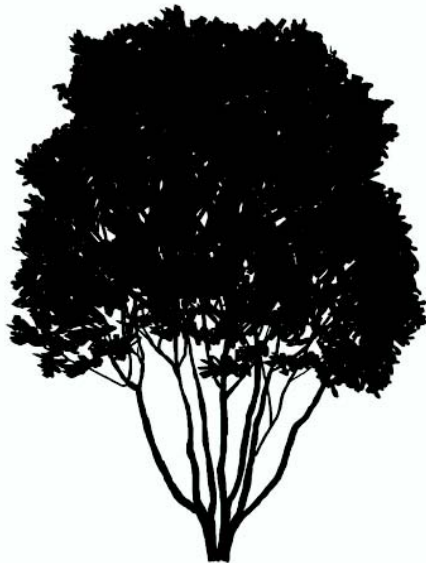


FRANKLIN TREE

COMMON NAME

***Franklinia alatamaha* Bartram ex. Marsh**

SCIENTIFIC NAME



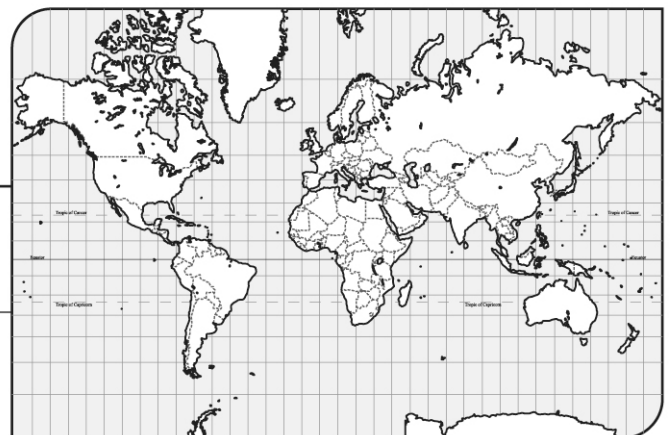
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Importance

Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*), also called lost camellia or Franklinia, is an unusually beautiful tree that is also one of the rarest trees in the world. Discovered in Georgia in the mid-eighteenth century, the Franklin tree was last recorded in the wild by a nurseryman and plant collector in 1803. Despite extensive searching in for specimens in the wild, no additional trees have been found anywhere in Georgia or elsewhere in the world. Today, all known specimens are in cultivation.

This native tree was collected from the banks of the Altamaha River in southeastern Georgia by John Bartam and his son William in 1765 and has been extinct in the wild since 1803. They named the tree in honor of their friend Benjamin Franklin and the river beside which they had found it (the species name, *alatamaha*, reflects the Bartrams' variant spelling of Altamaha). It has been perpetuated in cultivation because of its attractive flowers and foliage. Franklin tree is a member of the tea family and is closely related to *Stewartia* and *Gordonia* (loblolly bay). In his book *Travels*, William Bartram describes it as a



Tea Family (*Theaceae*)

FAMILY

Extinct in the Wild

RED LIST CATEGORY

beautiful shrub that appeared to be related to loblolly bay, but with larger and more fragrant flowers.

William Bartram later noted that the only spot where he had seen it in all of his explorations was on the 2- to 3-acre site along the Altamaha River, where it grew in abundance. Since the last definitive sighting of the tree in nature in 1803, many have continued to search for the tree, and some accounts describe spotting it along the Altamaha River as late as the 1840s. Fortunately, the Bartrams had taken plants and seeds home to Philadelphia, where they propagated the plant. All Franklin trees today are descendants of the Bartrams' specimens.

Today, this tree is propagated by botanical gardens, arboreta, and astute gardeners as a specimen tree or large shrub valued for its beauty, late summer flowers, good fall color, and interesting history. This is a tree that deserves a prominent location in the landscape. In 1969 a set of four U.S. postal stamps was issued, each bearing a plant associated with one of the four regions of the country. *Franklinia* was chosen to represent the South.

Description

Form: Franklin tree is a small, deciduous, understory tree with a rounded crown or a multi-stemmed shrub. As a single trunk tree, it can grow to 10 to 20 feet (3 to 6 m) tall or more, but is more often seen growing much shorter. It can range from 6 to 15 feet (1.5 to 4.5 m) wide, depending on its form.

Leaf: Narrow, oblong and wider at the tip, leaves are glossy dark green and up to 5 inches (13 cm) long. Leaves are alternate and simple, with conspicuous fall color. Look for

this tree to turn striking shades of orange, pink, red, maroon, and purple in autumn and to hold its leaves late into the fall.

Flower: One of the highlights of this tree is the camellia-like, sweetly fragrant, snow white flowers. These showy flowers are cup-shaped and 5-petaled, up to 3 inches (8 cm) diameter, with centers of bushy egg yolk yellow stamens. The flowers bloom in late summer to early fall and will flower until early frost.

Fruit: Dry rounded brown fruit up to 1 inch (2.5 cm) in diameter. Seeds appear and fall in the autumn.

Bark & Twig: The branches are low on the trunk, with white stripes along bark; older bark is grey. The tree has greenish brown twigs and is an interesting winter specimen.

Habitat and Ecology

Originally occurring along the banks of Altamaha River in McIntosh County on the Coastal Plain of Georgia, the only known colony occurred in acidic bogs at the heads of sand-hill branches. This perennial species has a moderate growth rate and may take some time to establish. This tree can be grown from climate zones 6 through 9, and is best grown in organically rich, medium moisture, well-drained soils in full sun to light shade. This small tree grows well in acidic soils, but dislikes wet sites.

It is best in full sun in northern climates, but appreciates some afternoon shade in hot summer climates. Franklin tree may not be reliably winter hardy in the northern parts of USDA Zone 5 and should be planted in a protected location in northerly locations. Its sparsely fibrous root system makes it difficult to transplant and it is best left undisturbed

once planted in the landscape. It can be propagated by cuttings and bare root plantings as well as by seed. Wilt and root rot can be serious problems. While it is an elegant landscape tree, it does not tolerate urban conditions well.

Threats

While William Bartram's notes report that this tree was once numerous along the Alatahama river, its only known geographic range was extremely limited and the species has not been seen in the wild since 1803. It is thought to have been brought to extinction largely through over-collection by nurserymen. Numerous expeditions to relocate the plant in the wild have failed. Fortunately, it is now a popular garden plant and lives on in cultivation.

Conservation Action

Franklin tree can be propagated by seeds or by rooted cuttings and is being grown and conserved *ex-situ* (outside of its original habitat) by botanic gardens and arboreta. Today efforts are being made to restore the tree to the wild by planting specimens near the site where they were originally discovered.

It can also be grown by gardeners and horticulturalists in the eastern United States. Would this tree make an elegant addition to your yard? You can also support this tree's conservation by being an ecotourist. Visit John Bartram's 18th century home near Philadelphia or find a botanic garden that grows Franklin trees.

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