

## Native Fringetree

By Susan Camp

A friend's recent inquiry about the native white fringetree sent me searching my past columns index to see when I had last written about this lovely spring ornamental. To my surprise, although I had included fringetree in several columns about various small native trees, I did not locate a column dedicated exclusively to this personal favorite.

White fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) is an eastern United States native. It is also called old man's beard or Grancy greybeard. In translation, *Chionanthus* means "snow flower," a far more attractive name for this pretty tree with its display of panicles of 4 to 8 inch long creamy white, delicately scented petals in April and May. *C. virginicus* is a member of the Olive family.

Native fringetree can grow to a height of 10 to 20 feet with a spread of 12 to 20 feet. It grows slowly at 4 to 8 inches a year, but under ideal light, soil, and drainage conditions, it can grow as much as 12 inches annually and reach a mature height of 30 feet.

The normal growth habit of fringetree is shrub-like with multiple branches, but you can remove the lower limbs to give it a tree shape with a typical spreading form and open crown. The shape can vary depending on the planting location and the surrounding trees and shrubs.

This low-maintenance, deciduous tree grows easily in moist, slightly acidic to slightly alkaline soil with high organic content and good drainage. It is drought, fire, and pollution resistant and has some resistance to deer damage. Fringetree tolerates clay soil and black walnut. It is not salt tolerant.

Fringetree requires full sun to part shade. The spear-shaped, medium green leaves reach up to 8 inches in length. It shows and photographs best against a background of dark green trees like hollies or conifers, but flowering is heaviest in full sun. The ideal planting spot would be one with full sun most of the day and part shade during the hot afternoon hours. Fall leaf color is yellow and not especially showy.

Once planted, fringetree is difficult to transplant, so choose the planting site carefully and away from patio, deck, or pool, as it will drop spent flowers on those surfaces. Last year, Jim and I sadly had to remove a 30-year-old fringetree that had grown too large and was hanging over our deck and also interfering with our TV satellite reception. The tree had been planted by previous owners, and had been badly pruned during its early growth period. It had never quite recovered from the pruning, so we finally made the difficult decision to cut down the 30-foot tree.

The chief attraction of fringetree is the springtime explosion of the feathery white blossoms, which attract numerous pollinators. Fringetree is dioecious; this means that separate male and female trees exist, although some fringetrees have perfect flowers that contain both male and female reproductive structures.

Male fringetrees produce showier flowers, but fertilized female or perfect flowers will develop clusters of blue-black, olive-like drupes that are consumed by songbirds and small mammals.

Insects and diseases rarely cause serious problems. Fringetree has some susceptibility to scale and mites. Borers, including emerald ash borers, can attack trees that are stressed or have damage to the bark. Occasional fungal diseases include leaf spot and powdery mildew. Phytophthora root rot can infect fringetrees planted in soil with poor drainage.

VCE Publication 3010-1499 “White Fringetree, Old-man’s beard,” Clemson University Extension Publication HGIC 1027 “Fringetree,” and NCSU Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Chionanthus virginicus*” all provide useful information about this lovely ornamental.

The website of the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society is an excellent resource to help you decide which native plants will fit into your garden scheme. Their guide “Native Plants for Southeast Virginia Including Hampton Roads Region” offers basic information on perennials, groundcovers, ferns, vines, grasses, shrubs, and trees. You can download a free pdf copy of the guide at <https://www.plantvirginianatives.org/plant-southeast-virginia-natives>.