

2023: YEAR OF THE TREE



JUNE SPOTLIGHT: THE FRINGE TREE

By Dan Sardaro, Awbury Arboretum

June is now upon us, and with the first month of summer here, the curtains have just about closed on the season of flowering trees. But before we turn over a new leaf, we have one more flowering tree to discuss first. To do so, I must turn to the wise words of one of my favorite stoics.

“A wizard is never late, nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to,” says Gandalf the Grey as he arrives at Frodo Baggins’ bucolic hamlet. In the Lord of the Rings, timing is everything – and just as it is never good to rush a good thing, the Fringe Tree always blooms precisely when it means to.

As the last moments of spring unfold, the Fringe Tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) flourishes, becoming an elegant wonder to behold. It offers us some of the final splashes of color before the verdant green of summer takes hold. Other common names for the tree include Flowering Ash, Grandfather Graybeard, Old Man’s Beard, and White Fringe Tree – all of which depict this tree’s unique beauty when it is in full bloom.

Now typically, May is the peak blooming season. But we still felt this species was worthy of a spotlight, so hopefully, you are reading this early in the month and can perhaps seek out a late bloomer. Here’s why it’s worth looking for one.

The Fringe Tree is a member of the Oleaceae or Olive Family, comprising nearly 150 species. Most species are native to tropical climates, except for local favorites like the Ash, Lilac, and Forsythia. Like those familiar names, *Chionanthus virginicus* is

native to a swath of North America stretching from southeastern Pennsylvania to Florida and West to Oklahoma and Texas.

The Fringe Tree produces snowy white flowers, so many in fact that it looks as if the sheer number of them is making the tree branches sag. The famed Swedish botanist Charles Linnaeus coined the name for this tree in 1753 based on its ethereal appearance when in bloom. Thus, he invented the genus name by marrying the Greek Chion (snow) and Anthos (flower). He continued by naming the species epithet (*virginicus*) after the colony Virginia, which at that time also encompassed Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois, and portions of Ohio and Western Pennsylvania.

Those flowers that captivated Linnaeus are arguably the best part of the Fringe Tree. While short-lived, the blossoms abound and cascade down the branches to create an aesthetic that can complete a garden or attract a pollinator. They have a lovely fragrance as well.

The individual flowers consist of 4-6 tendril-like petals up to one inch long on the female and a little longer on the male. The Fringe Tree is dioecious, meaning that it has separate male and female plants. This trait, adopted by many plants across the world, helps prevent self-pollination and inbreeding, which would lead to a less-diversified, weaker population.

The tree’s leaves, a deep, glossy green, begin sprouting alongside the flowers in spring. By the fall, small blue fruit (called drupe) drapes down from the branches where blossoms used to be, which lures birds looking for a migratory meal.

While a treasure to spot, the Fringe Tree is currently under threat. Here in Pennsylvania, it’s considered vulnerable due to a few factors. Loss of its woodland habitat and excessive deer browsing are two major impediments to the species’ resurgence, but invasive species also compound the issue. The Emerald Ash Borer, an invasive beetle that hardcore arborists and homeowners alike widely hate for killing tens of millions of trees in the US, has reportedly taken a liking to the Fringe Tree.

However, providing the right environment can reward you with a healthy tree. This species thrives in moist areas along creeks and low slopes. You should have a strong specimen provided you plant in well-watered soil and offer partial shade to full sun. If you care for more prolific blooms in the spring, find a spot with more sunlight – and for more vivid autumnal color, choose an area with more shade. Awbury has a specimen right next to its parking lot for those looking.

Ultimately, it is easy to grow and can withstand various PH levels and even the occasional drought. It’s a beautiful option for anyone looking to liven their garden with one of the final performers of spring!

Dan Sardaro is a novice birder and author of “Pollinators– from wasps to wind” and “Series on Natural Fibers ” He is also a former Awbury Arboretum intern.



2023 is the Year of Trees at Awbury Arboretum in Germantown. As part of their celebration, author Dan Sardaro’s column features a tree each month. Read all of his columns at awbury.org. Visit the Arboretum for special speakers and other “tree-mendous” events throughout the year!

Fringe Facts

- The fringe tree has been cultivated in Europe since the 18th century. It was introduced by the botanist John Bartram, who sent seeds and plants to his friend Peter Collinson in England. The tree is also grown in China and Japan, where it is called bai hua lan (white flower orchid) or shiro bana enju (white flower pagoda tree).
- State Flower: The tree is the state flower of Tennessee, showcasing its significance and cultural value in the region.
- The fringe tree is tolerant of air pollution and urban conditions. It can be grown as an ornamental plant in gardens, parks, and streetscapes. It is also a good choice for wildlife gardens, as it provides food and shelter for various animals.
- The tree has a slow growth rate and a long lifespan. Some specimens have been estimated to be over 100 years old. The wood of the fringe tree is hard and heavy, but not very durable. It is sometimes used for tool handles and fence posts.