

A Tribute to Ben Franklin

The days of August, with plenty of Southern heat and humidity, slowly give way to the Northerly breezes of September. The day length shortens, and the nighttime temperatures require the use of a blanket for comfort. Yes, the days of autumn are near, and the late summer bloomers are taking charge of the garden. However, there is a small tree that has been offering up its prodigious blooms for the last month, and has at least two additional months of merit yet to go. The tree is the former Georgian native of *Franklinia alatamaha*, the Franklin Tree.

At this point, one must surely wonder why it is called a 'former native' and the article is called a 'tribute'. In 1765, the father and son team of John and William Bartram discovered this plant growing along the Altamaha River in Georgia. The species name of *alatamaha* refers to the old spelling for the river. Seed was collected and brought back to the Bartram's house in Philadelphia, where descendants continue to prosper to this day. In the wild, the plant was last seen in the 1790's or perhaps as late as 1804, with no documented sightings since. Some theorize that it was driven south by the last ice age. Due to its slow retreat back north and its preference for the coolness of the North, it slowly faded in the heat of the Georgian summers. Others theorize that it was a chance cross between *Gordonia lasianthus* and *Stewartia malacodendron*, two southern natives. This cross has not been replicated in field studies. As for the tribute, the name of *Franklinia* is in recognition of John Bartram's good friend Ben Franklin.

Franklinia is in the Tea Family (Theaceae) and is closely allied to *Stewartia*, another summer bloomer. It prospers in well-drained soils, with full sun or light shade, and grows to about 20' tall and wide. It has a reputation for being difficult to grow, but the key is to grow it in well-drained soils, as soggy soils will certainly beget death. At the Rutgers Gardens, there is a plant that dates back to 1939. This certainly attests to its longevity when the conditions are proper! Aside from its heritage, its main claim to fame is 3-4" diameter white flowers with a central boss of yellow stamens that are produced from late July to early October. The flowers, with all their blousy beauty, are also pleasantly fragrant! In October, with flowers still opening, the 6" long foliage turns a rich scarlet red. The more sun the plant receives, the more shocking the fall color. In winter, the fissured bark and the open, upright vase shape habit is most appealing, especially with a light covering of snow!

The uses for this plant are many. The lower branches can be left intact, allowing it to be grown as a large shrub. As such, it can be used for up-close screening around a patio, swimming pool, or any other area where you are likely to pay close attention to the flowers and enjoy the fragrance. A good companion shrub is *Itea virginica*, the Virginia Sweetpire, which has white flowers in July, and a similar fiery red fall color. If the lower branches are removed and the *Franklinia* is grown as a small tree, it is an excellent candidate to adorn a planting by the front door, as a focal point for a patio or kitchen window, or imagine a small allee of *Franklinia* leading to a pool or another summer time destination. Since the shade that it casts is very light, the tree can be under-planted with

a number of groundcovers, such as spring blooming Epimediums and Hellebores, or autumn blooming *Tricyrtis* (Toad Lilies) and Cyclamens.

For the flower, the heritage, and the variety of applications it has in the landscape, the Franklinia is without doubt a plant worthy of a place of prominence in every garden!