

# The historic *Franklinia alatamaha*

The Latin generic names of many plants frequently provide information concerning the history of the period in which the genus was established, and specific epithets may also give descriptive or geographical information concerning particular species. This is certainly the case of *Franklinia alatamaha*, the historic Franklin tree, the generic name of which was given by the early American botanist and horticulturist Humphrey Marshall (1722-1801) in 1785 to honor the foremost American statesman, philosopher, and scientist of the time, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790). Marshall also coined the specific epithet, *alatamaha*, based on the name of the river in southeastern Georgia – the Altamaha River – where this unique plant was first discovered near the former site of Fort Barrington by John and William Bartram on October 1st, 1765. In providing the specific name, however, Marshall misspelled it, as he was undoubtedly unfamiliar with the southern river.

Specimens, fruits, and seeds of the Franklin tree were apparently not collected by the Bartrams on their southern sojourn in 1765. It remained for John's son, William, to collect these materials on a second, extended trip to the region in the 1770s when he traveled on behalf of an English patron, John Fothergill (1712-1780). Fothergill, one of the leading English horticulturists of his era, sought to grow as complete a collection of American plants as possible on his estate at Upton in Surrey. Due to William Bartram's success on behalf of his patron, Fothergill was able to present seedlings of this new and beautiful American plant to the Royal

Gardens at Kew in 1774. But it was not until William returned to his father's garden on the banks of the Schuylkill River in then suburban Philadelphia in 1777 that this novel plant was established in cultivation in North America.

Given the subsequent history of the plant in its native habitat, it is extremely fortunate that the plants thrived in the Bartram garden.

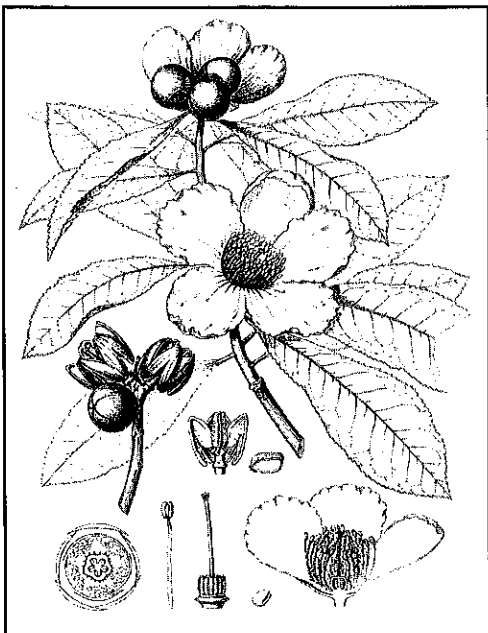
*Franklinia alatamaha* was last seen in its native habitat on the banks of the Altamaha River in 1803 by John Lyon, a Scottish naturalist who was collecting in the vicinity.

Lyon recorded for posterity what he saw and his thinking concerning its obvious rarity. In his journal, Lyon noted "It is sufficiently remarkable that this plant has never been found growing naturally in any other part of the United States as far as I can learn, and here there is not more than 6 or 8 full grown trees of it which does not spread over more than half an acre of ground, the seed has most probably been brought there originally from a great distance by a Bird of passage."

Despite repeated attempts to relocate the small population that occurred there in 1803 when it was seen by John Lyon, it has been concluded that the Franklin tree is extinct in the wild and is now only known as a cultivated plant. The extirpation of the Franklin tree from the native flora of the southeastern United States was the first example of the extinction of a North American plant for which we have historical documentation. Causes of its extinction have been long debated, but to my mind it is likely that over collection by English plant hunters for shipment of plants and propagating material to nurseries in Great Britain was the most likely cause. In England other cultivators of American plants like John Fothergill were willing to pay top prices for novelties of American flora, and in the case of the Franklin tree the supply could not meet demand.

A tree or frequently a shrub with its limbs covered with a smooth, dark, slate-gray bark with longitudinal fissures of a silverish hue, the plant produces bright green leaves during the growing season that are generally oblong in outline, tapering to the petiole at the base, and with sharply serrate margins. The large, creamy white flowers are camellia-like and very similar to those of species of *Stewartia*, a closely allied genus, and both genera are placed in the Theaceae or tea family. But unlike *Stewartia*, which is comprised of several Asian and North American species, the genus *Franklinia* is monotypic, including only the species discovered by the Bartrams. Additionally, the beautiful flowers of the Franklin tree or *Franklinia* do not appear in late spring or early summer like those of the *Stewartias* but delay their development until late August and early September. As a consequence, the shrub is one of the last ornamentals to provide a floral display toward the end of the growing season. Once flowering has commenced, flowers are continually produced – usually into October – until a killing frost brings flowering to an end. The first flowers are produced while the foliage retains its summer green; later flowers appear progressively as the

This botanical drawing of *Franklinia* appeared in Charles Sprague Sargent's monumental 14-volume *Silva* of North America. It was at Sargent's urging that many botanists attempted to relocate the Franklin tree in its native habitat, all to no avail.



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## Franklinia

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leaves assume autumn tints of reddish orange and burgundy. When the large flowers are viewed against the plant's fall foliage, they provide a sight unlike that of any other shrub or tree cultivated on Martha's Vineyard.

Our plant of the Franklin tree, propagated from a plant acquired from the Hess Nursery in 1960, grows not far from the Visitors' Center in the west field north near the "Yellow Corner" in association with the oriental persimmons (*Diospyros kaki*). It was planted in that location in April of 1970, and like all extant *Franklinias*, it is a direct descendant of the *Franklinias* brought into cultivation in Bartram's Garden in 1777.

As a part of the celebration of the three hundredth anniversary of John Bartram's birth in 1699, the Historic Bartram's Garden undertook an international survey in 1998 to determine the whereabouts of as many of the descendant plants

of *Franklinia* as possible. The Polly Hill Arboretum participated in this census, and the results have recently been made available. Responses from within the United States were received from thirty-eight states and the District of Columbia, and a total of 1,896 plants were recorded. Questionnaires were also returned from ten foreign countries where an additional 150 plants are documented. The census is continuing, and if you know of *Franklinias* not already registered, or should you be interested in the details of this survey – where *Franklinias* are growing, their cultural requirements, and retail sources for the plant – visit the Historic Bartram's Garden web site on the Internet at [www.libertynet.org/bartram](http://www.libertynet.org/bartram) and click on *Franklinia*. Also, we encourage you to visit the Arboretum this fall to see our specimen of this historic plant in flower.

– Stephen A. Spongberg