

Schimlinia: New Hybrid, Instant Favorite

by Tory Stewart

When asked to list my favorite trees, I gravitate towards quirky plants. Whether it has an interesting history, is unknown outside its native habitat, or just looks unusual, these types of plants make it to the top of my long, and ever-changing, list. Many plants fit the bill here at the Polly Hill Arboretum, but one that stands out for me is the Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatomahala*).

Discovered in the wilds of Georgia along the Altamaha River by John and William Bartram in 1765, the plant was introduced into cultivation by the 1770s. The tree's popularity resulted in widespread cultivation and propagation throughout the United States and Great Britain. By the early nineteenth century, though, the wild populations seen by the Bartrams were all but gone. And in 1803 Scottish naturalist John Lyon recorded seeing only six or eight trees by the Altamaha River. Later attempts to find these few trees were unsuccessful. *Franklinia alatomahala* was declared extinct in the wild.

Fortunately, the wide-scale distribution efforts upon the tree's discovery means that franklinia can still be seen in arboreta and botanic gardens around the world and grown in our gardens. Despite being native to Georgia, the tree thrives in USDA Zones 5 to 8 and does quite well here on Martha's Vineyard. Our largest specimen can be found in the West Field. Come August the tree will be bursting with white, camellia-like flowers with showy yellow stamens, which continue well into the fall. Fall is when franklinia really shines. The brilliant red, burgundy, and orange foliage sets off the bright white flowers—a truly remarkable sight.



A late bloomer, franklinia pairs beautiful white flowers with brilliant fall foliage.

While franklinia may be familiar to many gardeners, its close relative schima (*Schima argentea*) is more mysterious. In fact, this unusual tree was unknown to me until a fellow intern pointed it out on an Arboretum walk. I was struck by the fragrance and its delicate white flowers. And ... another tree in the Theaceae! Theaceae (the tea family), a particular passion of

mine, also includes stewartia and camellia. Yes, schima has all the qualities to make my list—quirky, obscure, and interesting.

An evergreen tree, schima is a common plant in Asia where its native range extends from Nepal to Taiwan. Relatively tall, some individuals reach over 60 feet. Its smallish, fragrant white flowers are typically found alone or in groups at the end of the branches. In its native range where the wood is widely used in construction, schima holds ethnobotanical significance. In Nepal the leaves and roots are used medicinally to treat fever, and its bark for intestinal issues (and also as a fish poison). You can see our very own schima near the eastern entrance of Polly's Play Pen, where it flowers in late July and August.

Horticulturists are compelled to create hybrids between different species of the same genus, hoping for something new,



Despite their differences, it's clear that these two (franklinia, on left and schima, on right) are close relatives.

better, different. Polly Hill called this pushing pollen. And when two genera, like *Franklinia* and *Schima*, are very closely related, you can be sure some enterprising plantperson will attempt an intergeneric cross with the hopes of combining their best characteristics. *Schima* offers genetic diversity, adaptability, and disease resistance. *Franklinia* brings cold hardiness and desirable ornamental traits. Hybridization is also a way to preserve franklinia's genetic material, especially important since it's extinct in the wild. Enter Dr. Tom Ranney of Mountain Horticultural Crops Research Station in Fletcher, North Carolina. Attempts at hybridization were successful: ×*Schimlinia floribunda* was born.

The new plant (We'll call it schimlinia.) exhibits characteristics from each parent. For example, schima has multiple flowers on a stalk; a trait also seen in schimlinia. In terms of leaf shape, schimlinia more closely resembles franklinia. Flower size is one area where the trait settled between the parent plants. Schima flowers are often small (about 1 inch), whereas franklinia flowers tend to be double in size (to 2½ inches). The schimlinia flowers favor the flower size seen in franklinia, ranging from 1½ to 2¾ inches. When it comes to number of flowers, however, the new hybrid goes above and beyond! The new hybrid schimlinia plants have anywhere from 10 to 90 flowers per



Multiple schima flowers nestle among its evergreen leaves

flowering shoot, whereas either parent tree has less than 20 flowers. The appropriately chosen species name *floribunda* comes from the Latin term for many flowers.

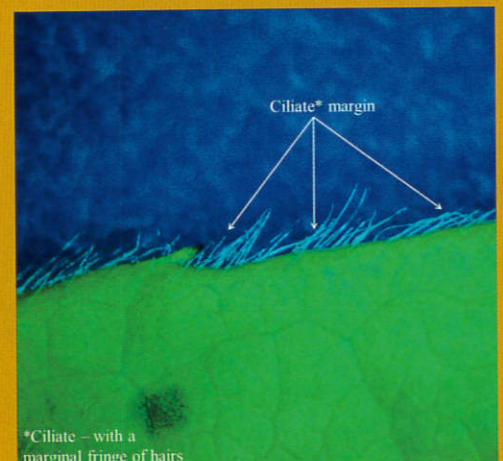
Schimlinia—rare, unusual, obscure—is still in trials and not available in nurseries, but it looks to be an exciting potential

addition to PHA's plant collection in the future, and to my list of favorite plants! In the meantime its intriguing and beautiful parents, franklinia and schima, are available at select nurseries and can be enjoyed in all seasons.

Focusing on Stewartia

PHA holds a national collection of stewartia as part of a continent-wide program administered by the Plant Collections Network (PCN). Polly Hill's success in cultivating a wide variety of stewartia forms the basis of our diverse collection. As our collection grows, so does our interest in learning more about these remarkable trees and sharing our knowledge. To that end, curatorial intern Tory Stewart has created a comprehensive

Stewartia resource for us. She meticulously gathered pictures of the species and cultivars including photographs of minute details of stewartia morphology. A key, detailed descriptions, and cultural information are coupled with these images allowing even those daunted by technical jargon to feel at ease. Tory used a digital microscope purchased through a generous grant from the Vineyard Golf Foundation to capture the close-up images.



So that's what a ciliate margin looks like! Our new web-based stewartia resource will reveal all.