
The Franklin tree: an American icon

In the second of this occasional series on tree species extinct in the wild, **CHARLES CRESSON**, writes about the discovery of *Franklinia alatamaha* and its history in cultivation.

During the 1700s Benjamin Franklin's close friend John Bartram of Philadelphia became the American colony's preeminent botanist and naturalist. George III appointed him Royal Botanist in 1765. Through the sponsorship of Peter Collinson, a successful London cloth merchant, and later, Dr John Fothergill, Bartram travelled and explored throughout eastern North America, supplying new and rare American plants to scientists and wealthy Europeans, eager to enrich their gardens and estates. His nursery and garden has been called America's first "botanic garden" and is preserved to this day.

It has often been said that it is not what you know, but who you know. In the eyes of Hollywood, good looks can escalate an actor to stardom. And so it is in the plant world. The Franklin tree, *Franklinia alatamaha*, bears the name of Benjamin Franklin, one of Philadelphia's most prominent citizens. As a statesman, philosopher and inventor he influenced the course of history. The Franklin tree's beauty and association with prominent personalities of the eighteenth century may well have saved it from obscurity as well as extinction!

Two years after Spain ceded eastern Florida to Britain, Collinson sponsored John Bartram to explore in the Southeastern region of North America. In September of 1765 he and his son William came upon "several curious shrubs" along the Altamaha River (now spelled Altamaha) in eastern Georgia, but as they were hurrying to assist at an Indian Council in Florida, they were unable to stop to identify or collect seeds of this new discovery. Twenty years later, William would write "there are two or three acres of ground where it grows plentifully."

Sponsored by Dr Fothergill, William Bartram returned to the site in 1773. The following year, Fothergill presented a plant to Kew Gardens. On his return north in autumn of 1777, William collected the seeds or seedlings that would be planted at their garden in Philadelphia. He arrived home in January of 1778 to the British army's occupation of the city and the recent death of his father William. Within five years, these plants were producing seeds and it is from these plants that all existent specimens are descended. Despite 200 years of exhaustive searches, this species was last seen in the wild in 1803.

This lovely relative of the camellia forms a small multi-trunked deciduous tree 6 to 9m (20-30ft) tall which bears cupped white *Stewartia*-like 7.5cm (3in.) flowers with golden stamens in late summer. Opening in succession at the end of the branches for two months, the blossoms appear in late July among green foliage and may continue against its red autumn tints. In the garden, the light shade beneath the *Franklinia*'s open branch habit makes it an excellent companion for many other plants. *Franklinia* is adaptable and easy to grow provided it has an acidic well-drained soil and is not exposed to



Franklinia alatamaha, the Franklin tree, is a relative of the camellia. It makes a small multi-stemmed tree, **above left** and has showy flowers, **above right** in summer and good autumn colour. The bark, **top right** is also attractive.

63

excessively dry conditions in summer. While of southern origin, it has proven fully hardy north of Philadelphia where winter temperatures dip below -18°C (0°F), to USDA hardiness zone 5-6. Indeed, were it not hardy in Philadelphia the Franklin tree would most certainly be extinct today. *Franklinia alatamaha* has become a popular ornamental plant in the eastern United States where hardy, but its popularity in Europe has been limited by its requirement of high summer temperatures to grow well. Despite being descended from so few individuals, perhaps even just one plant, seedling variation is beginning to occur and superior individuals are being selected.

Although William Bartram named the tree after family friend Benjamin Franklin, the first description of *Franklinia alatamaha* was published by Bartram's cousin Humphry Marshall in his *Arbustrum Americanum* in 1785. Closely related to *Gordonia*, it was known as *G. pubescens* until 1925 when its current taxonomic status was established. More recently the hybrid \times *Gordonia grandiflora* has been created between franklinia and *Gordonia lasianthus*, a less hardy evergreen native of the southeastern US.

Whether Benjamin Franklin ever knew of the honor bestowed by his friend William Bartram in the naming of this special tree is not known, but clearly the legacy of each is enhanced and immortalized further by the other. Truly, franklinia is an American icon of the plant world.