



Meet the Chinese Fringe Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

Name:

The Chinese Fringe tree is a spectacular, small, deciduous tree that adds interest to the landscape. Clusters of showy, lightly fragrant, fringe-like white blooms and gray-brown bark that becomes ridged and furrowed with age are the primary attractions. *Chionanthus retusus* is native to China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan.

Interesting Facts:

- The Chinese Fringe tree belongs to the genus *Chionanthus* (pronounced "kye-oh-NANTH-us"), a combination of two Greek words: *chion* = snow and *anthos* = flower, referring to its profusion of white flowers in spring.
- A century-old Chinese Fringe tree grows at the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in Boston, Massachusetts. The Arnold Arboretum was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, America's first landscape architect.
- Chinese Fringe tree is more tree-like and graceful than its straggly cousin, *Chionanthus virginicus*, native to southeastern United States.
- Both species belong to the olive family, due to their small (3/8 to 1/2 inch long), blue-black, olive-like fruit that ripens in late summer to early fall. The fruit occur only on female plants and are enjoyed by birds. Both female and male trees bear flowers.

Description:

Our Master Gardener tree list—entitled "Ornamental Trees for Home Gardens and Landscapes," describes the Chinese Fringe tree as slow-growing, with upright rounded shape, maturing to 20 feet tall and 15-20 feet wide. It is a deciduous tree, meaning it drops all of its leaves in one season. Some specimens are multi-trunked, while others—especially those raised from Korean seed—are single-stemmed.

In late spring, pure white, delicately fragrant flowers hang in 4 inch long clusters at the end of the current season's branch growth. Flowers last about 2-3 weeks, and can be forced into early bloom indoors. Leaves are thick, glossy, dark green, with rounded oval shape, 2-4 inches long. The fall leaf color is insignificant in warm climates—typically a medium brown.



The *Chionanthus retusus* 'Arnold's Pride' cultivar is grown from a particular seedling that distinguished itself at the Arnold Arboretum by having rapid growth, a good central leader trunk/branch form, and by self-fruiting. It grows to 25 feet tall and wide, but may grow to 40 feet with maturity. Don Shadow, plant connoisseur and nurseryman, introduced a Chinese Fringe tree cultivar he found in Knoxville, Tennessee, called 'China Snow.'

It has glossy green leaves all summer, bears more flowers than the original Chinese Fringe tree, and grows to 6-10 feet in ten years, but may eventually mature to 25 feet tall.

Care:

Plant fall through early spring in full sun or afternoon shade, and sheltered from wind. Full shade results in poor floral display. Chinese Fringe tree is adaptable to a wide range of soil conditions, but is slow-growing. Water deeply after planting, mulch, and water regularly until established, which may take a couple of years. Although Chinese Fringe tree tolerates moderate drought, it does best with supplemental water.

The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates the Chinese Fringe tree as a "moderate water use" tree. The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California Landscapes at www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS.

Chinese Fringe tree needs minimal maintenance. Prune in winter to shape and to remove dead wood. Cut off lower branches to preserve a standard form (one trunk instead of multi-trunked). Fertilizers are usually unnecessary.

This tree resists most pests and diseases, though occasionally may experience mites, powdery mildew, or fungal leaf spot.

Design Tips:

Chinese Fringe tree is splendid accent tree. Plant it in front of a dark backdrop for striking contrast when in bloom. The snow white flowers are luminescent in the moonlight--a favorable addition to a "moon garden." It can be used as a small street tree, near a patio, in groupings, or in perennial borders. Because of its pollution tolerance, it is well-suited to urban plantings.

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