



# Franklinia alatamaha

The story of this choice, summer-flowering tree illustrates how the cultivation of some plants can help ensure their survival once wild populations have been lost, as **Andrea Wulf** explains

**IN EARLY SUMMER 1765** John Bartram, an American farmer and newly appointed 'King's Botanist' to George III, left his farm and nursery, just outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to investigate the flora of Florida and Georgia. Months later, on 1 October, he discovered a small tree that would soon become extinct in the wild. Reputedly, all of today's specimens across America and Europe derive from seedlings his son William would later grow (see box, right).

*Franklinia alatamaha* is a showy shrub or small tree with fragrant alabaster blooms, similar to those of *Stewartia*, another summer-flowering tree. It is the single species in a monotypic genus (closely related to both *Gordonia* – see pp384–385 – and *camellias*). In autumn

**GARDEN SURVIVOR** Extinct in the wild, *Franklinia alatamaha* (left) is rare in cultivation in the UK, but plants are offered by specialist nurseries. Cupped flowers appear in summer (far left) and by autumn the foliage develops rich tints before falling (below left). Though hardy, the plant does best in a continental climate, needing hot summers to flower – warmer temperatures may increase its use the UK

its leaves turn radiant colours before falling. *Franklinia* is fairly hardy, suggesting it originated further north. Perhaps during the last Ice Age plants migrated south, but when the climate warmed, conditions there became less suitable and the plant died out. (Another theory is that the *Franklinia* Bartram found had been planted there but failed to survive the location's climate.)

#### Excitement seeker

John Bartram was always in search of new, exciting species. Every year for three decades he had dispatched to English merchant and plant collector Peter Collinson dozens of what he called 'five-guinea boxes' – each filled with seeds collected from America's trees and shrubs. Collinson distributed the content to wealthy estate owners and nurserymen, feeding the growing obsession for American plants and introducing to the English landscape *Hamamelis virginiana* (witch hazel), *Pinus echinata* (shortleaf pine), and *Kalmia latifolia* (American mountain laurel), among others.

'They say they are tired of old ones', Collinson told Bartram in the early 1760s, when gardening friends greedily asked for new species. They wanted Bartram to go on new expeditions, but he was reluctant. In his mid-sixties, and increasingly feeling his age, he complained to Collinson, 'I have sent them seeds of almost every tree & shrub from Nova Scotia to Carolina – do they think I can make new ones?'

The year before, he had strained his hips and in the same winter broke his arm falling from a tree while collecting holly berries. Despite these ailments, Bartram knew he had no choice if he

wished to stay in business, and in the end, agreed to continue his travels.

On his way from Savannah, Georgia to St Augustine in Florida, Bartram found *Nyssa ogeche*, 'a rare tupelo with red acid fruit called limes which is used for punch', and other trees that thrived in the swamps. There were magnolias, 'a shrub like the dogwood', and a 'cypress in deep water'. However, the most exciting discovery was *Franklinia alatamaha* – a 'very curious shrub' from near the Altamaha River (its modern spelling) in Georgia. Bartram was sure that this was a new species, if not a new genus, but he could not find any seeds to take home.

#### Ensuring survival

His son William went back twice on his own and found it 'in perfect bloom, as well as bearing ripe fruit'. When William finally returned home to Philadelphia in 1777 after years of travelling, he brought ripe seeds from which he raised several seedlings. John Bartram never saw their glorious blossom, as he died during the four years the plant took to flower. William, though, continued the nursery and sent saplings and seeds to Europe and to gardeners in America. *Franklinia alatamaha* was only ever found in the location Bartram saw it first in 1765. The tree was spotted here, for the last time in the wild in 1803, by John Lyon, who noted about six full-grown trees.

In 1783 the Bartram nursery catalogue listed the plant as 'Alatamaha, Undescript Shrub lately from Florida'. Two years later William Bartram's cousin Humphry Marshall described it as *Franklinia alatamaha* in his influential *Arbustrum Americanum*, a catalogue of American trees and shrubs, crediting William with naming it after old family friend Benjamin Franklin. British botanists classified it as *Gordonia pubescens* and later *G. alatamaha* – its current name was legitimised in 1925. Crosses between *Gordonia lasianthus* (see pp384–385) and *Franklinia* have been made, creating *x Gordonia grandiflora* with rather larger blooms; plants have yet to become available in the UK.

Today *Franklinia alatamaha* is available in specialist nurseries in Britain. It needs well-drained, acidic soil and plenty of water. It is grown more widely in North America than in Britain for it wants long hot summers to flower. But with warmer summers ahead, gardeners in Britain should be able to see this wonderful tree in its full beauty more often; perhaps in future the young individuals in the wild garden at RHS Garden Wisley and in the Exotic Garden at RHS Garden Rosemoor will entice visitors not only with their story but also their elegant blossoms. ■

*Andrea Wulf* is a writer and garden historian

**i Suppliers include**  
 • **Bridgemere Nurseries**, Cheshire. 01270 521100; [www.bridgemere.co.uk](http://www.bridgemere.co.uk)  
 • **Burncoose Nurseries**, Cornwall. 01209 860316; [www.burncoose.co.uk](http://www.burncoose.co.uk)

**i Further reading** *The Brother Gardeners: Botany, Empire and the Birth of an Obsession*, by Andrea Wulf, William Heinemann, April 2008, £18.99, ISBN 9780434016129

## BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Benjamin Franklin introduced John Bartram to the vibrant world of English botany in the early 1730s and continued throughout his life to support Bartram's endeavours. As lifelong friends, Bartram and Franklin also founded the American Philosophical Society in order to 'improve the common Stock of Knowledge', with botany a central part of the enterprise.

## CALL FOR SPECIMENS

The Florida Museum of Natural History is conducting a survey to establish if all *Franklinia* are descended from William Bartram's tree. They are asking gardeners in the USA and Europe to send samples for DNA identification. If you can spare material and would like to help, place one to three fresh leaves in 80–100g of silica gel desiccant (granules) in a plastic zip-lock bag, together with information of the location, date of harvest, and any other data about the specimen, a photograph and contact details. Send in a padded envelope to: Charlotte M Porter, Florida Museum of Natural History, PO Box 117800, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-7800, USA.