

RARE AMERICAN PLANT LIVES IN HARFORD COUNTY – THE FRANKLIN TREE

By Joe Lewis (Originally published April 2009 in the newsletter of Susquehanna Beekeepers Association)

After last month's exciting bee friendly plants presentation by Art, Barbara and Nathan Gruver I was inspired to continue my pursuit of seeds and plants suitable for a bee garden and bee yards in general. I continue to share seed of the Golden Rain Tree and the Bee Bee Tree or Korean Evodia. Both of those were originally native to Eastern Asia. But Barbara Gruver told me that a local nurseryman and orchardist in Forest Hill might have some specimens. My sincere thanks to Ed Yoder who knew this individual and arranged a visit.

Finding Sam Jones and his former Atlantic Star Nursery was a real joy and meeting another person who loves plants like I do always makes for a great day. Sam Jones is a walking horticulture encyclopedia who patiently explained the biology of several of his bee friendly plants. We looked at Witch Hazel (Arnold Promise) that was blooming weeks ahead of the forsythia. And initially it fooled me – I thought I was looking at forsythia! We found two plantings of the Korean Evodia or bee bee tree, but even better we discovered that it was the other related, but lesser known sub-species of evodia named *evodia hupehensis*. (The seeds I passed out at the last club meeting are from Dave Yale's *evodia daniellii*.)

But the real interesting thing was being introduced to Sam's Franklin tree. Named for Benjamin Franklin, it is considered by American botanists to be one of the rarest native American plants and it is extinct in the wild.



I researched information on this tree and found an online article in the *Journal of the Built and Natural Environments*, Terrain.org by Lucy Rowland, a science librarian at the University of Georgia. Some of the following information is taken from her article (online access info at the end of this article).

The name, *Franklinia alataamaha* sounds exotic, and it deserves to be. It is also known as the lost Camellia, or the lost Gordonia, and it has perhaps the most romantic, mysterious past of any native American plant species. John Bartram and his son William discovered a modest grove of this unusually beautiful, small tree in Georgia in 1765. But in less than 40 years, by 1803, the tree had completely disappeared from its original location. It only survived due to the Bartrams' collecting plants and seeds as avid horticulturists and propagating them in their Philadelphia



garden the last quarter of the 18th century. All cultivated plants today descend from one or more of their collected specimens.

Franklinia and Gordonia are members of the tea family (Theaceae), which also includes the camellias, most often seen in cultivation in the United States as *Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua*, although there are about 80 species, including *C. sinensis*, which is the source of tea leaves. Camellias are native to Japan, Korea, and China.

In 1998, Bartram's Garden undertook a census where botanical gardens and individuals voluntarily reported living examples. In this non-scientific census, the top five states having Franklin trees were Pennsylvania (559), North Carolina (181), New Jersey (157), Virginia (120), and New York (116). Georgia, where *Franklinia* was originally native, reported only 58 locations.



As the season progresses the leaves turn a beautiful shade of red, evidently while the blossoms are still there! Sam says the bees love his Franklin tree.

One of the interesting side notes about the Franklin tree is that it has become a tradition for Quaker meeting houses (churches) to have one on their grounds. So Sam arranged to have one of his Franklin trees grown from seed to be planted at the local “Friends” meeting house in Darlington. We are all very hopeful that the growing conditions are suitable there and that our area will be able to enjoy the beauty of another special plant.

Referenced online article by Lucy M. Roland, (as of March 15, 2009) available at:
<http://www.terrain.org/articles/18/rowland.htm>