

Chionanthus retusus—Chinese Fringe Tree

Chinese Fringe tree, or *Chionanthus retusus*, is a member of the olive family (Oleaceae), which possesses a number of other ornamental flowering shrubs and trees, including, olive, lilac, privet, jasmine and forsythia. The scientific name of this tree is a compound word from the Greek, “chion” meaning snow and “anthos” meaning flower. And an apt name it is because in the spring, the tree is a virtual “snowstorm” of flowers in full bloom!

Chionanthus retusus is typically a multi-stemmed shrub but can be trained into a single-stemmed tree reaching about 20 feet in height. The leaves are simple, opposite and ovate with a distinct tip that is often notched. The leaves are thin, but leathery, with a glossy upper surface. Bright yellow-green leaves sprout with the flowers in the spring and are deciduous in the winter. The abundant flowers are clustered in a loose inflorescence at the tips of branches. Each flower possesses four small fused sepals, four narrow, strap-shaped petals fused at their bases, two stamens fused to the petals and a central pair of fused carpels. The petals provide the tree with the “fringe” of its common name. The fruits are dark bluish-purple, wrinkled, oblong berries that look very much like small, shriveled olives with a large central stony pit. The fruits persist on the trees during the winter and provide added color to the canopy.

This tree species is very well adapted to inland Southern California since it requires summer heat and some winter frost. It does best in well-drained soils. You can see this tree in the median of Victoria Avenue between Gratton and Monroe and between Tyler and Steward. Go see them in early April when they are most likely to be in full bloom!

