

# LOBLOLLY BAY

## *Gordonia lasianthus*

by David Pais

During his travels in north Florida in 1774, William Bartram described his discovery of loblolly bay somewhere near Lake George:

**"The tall aspiring *Gordonia lasianthus*, which now stood in my view in all its splendour, is every way deserving of our admiration.... [It] may be said to change and renew its garments every morning throughout the year; and every day appears with unfading lustre."**

Loblolly bay has always been my favorite flowering landscape tree. In bloom it is truly one of the most strikingly beautiful trees of our native flora. The solid white corolla, composed of five sepals and petals, are set off by a cluster of numerous bright yellow stamens. It is one of only two native representatives of the Theaceae (tea) family (the other is silky camellia *Stewartia malachodendron*).

Though the primary habitat of loblolly bay is well drained flatwoods, bayheads, and low hammocks, it seems also to thrive on higher and drier sites if attention is given to watering during initial establishment. Loblolly bay is an excellent choice for wet sites, too, such as the banks of swales, drainage areas, ponds, and lakesides, provided there is very good drainage and no prolonged periods of inundation, which it will not tolerate.

The natural range of *Gordonia lasianthus* extends southward to approximately the northern latitude of Lake Okeechobee, although it has been reported as far south as Martin and Glades counties. Soils and temperatures in south Florida generally produce thin trees with fewer flowers. The northern range extends throughout the coastal Piedmont all the



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way into the Carolinas and westward to Louisiana.

Driving upstate, you first notice the tree coming into bloom in early June in the central counties, peaking in July around Gainesville, and through August in the Panhandle. Loblolly generally blooms continuously through the summer months with a few blooms remaining until early fall, which—along with its lustrous evergreen leaves with silvery undersides—greatly adds to its ornamental value.

The state champion tree, located in the Ocala Forest, is 84 feet high, 58 feet wide, and has a circumference of over 12 feet, as reported by Daniel Ward, University of Florida botanist. In the landscape, you can expect it to become a mid-canopy tree maturing around 25 to 35 feet high. It responds very well to pruning after blooming in the summer, which will keep the shape dense and compact.

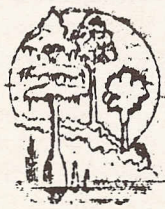
In the wild, its native associates are evergreens—red bay, sweet bay magnolia, and hollies—and deciduous species such as hophornbeam, tupelo, and maple. In cultivation, good associate trees could include red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), fever tree (*Pinckneya pubens* [bracteata]), and dahoon holly (*Ilex cassine*). Good understory associates could be Virginia willow (*Itea virginica*), Florida anise (*Illicium floridanum*), Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), honey-suckle azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*), and titi (*Cyrilla racemiflora*).

The common name, loblolly, which the tree shares with *Pinus taeda* for an unknown reason, is probably derived from 16th century dialect meaning "to boil or bubble soup", and was also a term used to disparagingly describe cabin boys on naval vessels. Perhaps because of its association with swamps and wetlands, the tree was initially considered of little value, while in fact its cinnamon colored wood is highly prized for cabinetmaking.

Loblolly bay truly is a premier landscape tree.

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