

Loblolly bay

(*Gordonia lasianthus*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

Loblolly bay is an attractive evergreen tree found in swamps, bayheads and cypress domes throughout much of Florida. Its fragrant showy flowers bloom spring through summer and attract a variety of pollinators, including bees, flies and even the occasional hummingbird. Birds and other small animals find cover in the dense foliage. The tree is often confused with Sweetbay magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), which also has large white flowers and occurs in the same habitat.



Photo by Mary Keim

One of only two camellias native to Florida, Loblolly bay flowers are similar in appearance to those of the popular non-native ornamentals *Camellia japonica* and *C. sasanqua*. The creamy white flowers have five waxy petals with lightly fringed margins. They surround a center of bright yellow stamens. The blooms may be 4–5 inches in diameter. They are pedicellate, solitary and axillary. The simple leaves are glossy, dark green and leathery with bluntly toothed margins. They may be up to 5 inches long. Older leaves turn red in the fall. The trunk is straight with grayish- to reddish-brown bark that becomes furrowed with age. The crown is narrow and conical or cylindrical. Fruit is a woody, ovoid capsule that splits open when ripe.

The genus name *Gordonia* honors James Gordon (1728–1791), a British nurseryman who specialized in camellias. The species epithet *lasianthus* is from the Greek *lasios*, meaning “shaggy, velvety or hairy,” and *anthos*, meaning “flower.”

Family: Theaceae (Camellia or tea family)

Native range: Panhandle, peninsula south to Sarasota and Palm Beach counties

To see where natural populations of Loblolly bay have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Lifespan: Long-lived perennial

Soil: Moist, wet or seasonally inundated, acidic, sandy or organic soils

Exposure: Full sun to partial shade

Growth habit: 30–60'+ tall with 10–15' spread

Propagation: Seeds (may require stratification), cuttings

Florida regions of landscape suitability: North, Central, South

Garden tips: Loblolly bay's semi-formal appearance, rich evergreen foliage, large showy flowers, and fall color makes it an excellent ornamental or canopy tree – in the right conditions. It requires consistent moisture and does well on lake or pond edges. It does not tolerate drought, fire or salt. Newly planted specimens may require frequent watering for up to a year. Water established plants during dry periods. Choose planting site carefully as Loblolly bays are averse to root disturbance.

Plants are available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.

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