

A Proposal to Change Georgia's State Flower

Georgia has one of the richest landscapes in the nation. Its vast plant diversity should be represented by a native flower important to both our ecosystems and our heritage.

Current State Flower: Cherokee Rose (*Rosa laevigata*)

The Issue: Cherokee Rose is a non-native, invasive species in Georgia

Proposed New State Flower: Sweetbay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)



Sweetbay Magnolia by Alan Cressler

Overview

Cherokee Rose (*Rosa laevigata*) was designated as the state flower of Georgia in 1916 under the mistaken belief that it was indigenous to Georgia; however, it is indigenous to South China, and its introduction to Georgia was the result of deliberate cultivation. In fact, Cherokee Rose is a Category 4 Invasive plant. It is important for Georgia to promote native plant species in its identity to align with the state's priorities to protect and preserve ecosystems. The non-native, invasive Cherokee Rose should be replaced with a native plant that represents Georgia's natural heritage.

The Georgia Native Plant Society suggests that Sweetbay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*), a native plant found across Georgia, would better represent Georgia as its state flower. Sweetbay Magnolia supports the lifecycle of Georgia's state butterfly, the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail, contributing to vital pollinator habitat. It has a rich history in Georgia's botanical heritage and was used by indigenous communities.



Eastern Tiger Swallowtail
by Ellen Honeycutt

The majority of U.S. states have a native plant as their state flower (40 out of 50), recognizing that indigenous plants are an important part of a state's heritage. Georgia's original nomination in 1916 meant to do that as well. It is time to rectify that mistake.

The importance of native plants is more recognized than ever. In Georgia, Governor Kemp has signed proclamations recognizing the importance of native plants, including designating April as National Native Plant Month and September as Georgia Native Plants Month.

Background

In 1916, the plant *Rosa laevigata* (known as the Cherokee Rose) was chosen as the floral emblem of the State of Georgia (known as the “State Flower”). It was chosen in the mistaken belief that it was native:

Approved August 15, 1916. FLORAL EMBLEM OF THE STATE. No. 42. A RESOLUTION. Whereas, In many of the States of the Union some flower indigenous to the soil of the State has been chosen as an emblem of its sovereignty; and Preamble. Whereas, Hitherto the General Assembly of Georgia has made no such selection; and Whereas, The Cherokee Rose, having its origin among the aborigines of the northern portion of the State of Georgia, is indigenous to its soil, and grows with equal luxuriance in every county of the State. Be it therefore by the House of Representatives of Georgia, the Senate concurring, resolved, That, at the suggestion and request of the Georgia Federation of Women's Clubs, the Cherokee Rose be and the same is hereby adopted as and declared to be the floral emblem of the State of Georgia.

In fact, Cherokee Rose is native to South China. It is a rambunctious grower and a Category 4 Invasive plant. The intent was good, but the truth is Cherokee Rose does not represent Georgia’s natural heritage.

Proposed New State Flower, Sweetbay Magnolia

Sweetbay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) is well-suited to represent Georgia as the new state flower.

- Sweetbay Magnolia is **a native plant found throughout Georgia** that boasts breathtaking white, fragrant flowers and glossy evergreen leaves. Its stunning appearance captures the essence of Georgia's picturesque landscapes.
- Sweetbay Magnolia’s botanical heritage has **historical significance**, having been utilized by indigenous communities for medicinal and ceremonial uses.
- Georgians can feel good about planting Sweetbay Magnolia in their yards. It provides soil stabilization and is used in rain gardens for stormwater control.
- As a native species, Sweetbay Magnolia **contributes to the state's rich biodiversity**, providing habitats and food sources for various wildlife.
- Sweetbay Magnolia directly supports the lifecycle of **the Georgia state butterfly, the Eastern Tiger Swallowtail**, contributing to the critical needs of our pollinators.



Sweetbay Magnolia by Richard and Teresa Ware

Interested in learning more? Contact Georgia Native Plant Society at info@gnps.org or 770-343-6000.