

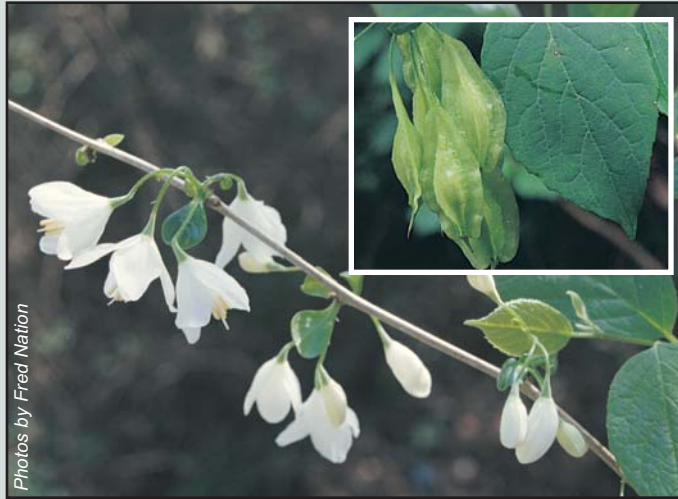
# Two-Winged Silverbell

(*Halesia diptera*)

By Fred Nation, Educator, Baldwin County

For most of the year, two-winged silverbells are ordinary-looking small trees. But in the spring, when they come into bloom, masses of pure white, bell-shaped flowers transform the silverbells into some of the showiest and most conspicuous trees in the understory of our southern forests.

*Halesia diptera* is deciduous, with yellow foliage in the fall. The leaves are alternate, to about 5 inches long, oval in outline, with an abruptly tapering tip. The edges (margins) of the leaves have a few blunt, irregular teeth, and the stalks (petioles) are about 3/4 inch long. The bark is brownish gray, rough and scaly, eventually developing ridges and furrows. Flowers are very showy, bell-shaped, to about 3/4 inch long, white, with four distinct petals, borne on long stalks in clusters of four or five, in March or April. Golden yellow stamens, which protrude slightly from the centers of the flowers, are reminiscent of "bell clappers." The unusual fruits are flat, oval-oblong, pale green as they develop, to about 2 inches long, with two broad membranes or "wings" along the edges.



Since silverbells are native members of our southern forested communities, they are of value to a variety of wildlife species within these systems. Squirrels are reportedly quite fond of the fruits, which turn dark brown and develop a large seed when mature. An old folk name for two-winged silverbell is squirrel bread! Bees are often seen around the flowers, gathering nectar and pollen. When the trees grow near water, beavers seem to be especially fond of the bark.

Though in most areas it is not a common species, two-winged silverbell occurs in a surprising variety of habitats, including mixed upland forests, rich wooded bluffs, and river floodplains. The native range is from extreme southern South Carolina, along the gulf coastal plain, into east Texas. In Alabama, two-winged silverbells are most often seen in the southern half of the state, occurring as occasional small trees in the understory of mixed or hardwood forests where fire is infrequent or rare.

*Halesia diptera* and the similar but somewhat larger and more rare Carolina silverbell, *Halesia carolina*, are becoming quite popular in southern landscapes, where there is great demand for small ornamental trees that grow well in a variety of lawn conditions. Both silverbell species are widely available from nurseries and garden centers, and both grow quite well in cultivation throughout Alabama in broken shade from the larger canopy species in the landscape.

The Alabama State Champion two-winged silverbell is in Wilcox County, measuring 38.5 inches in circumference, 76 feet tall, with an average crown spread of 36.5 feet. 🌳



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