



The Grapevine

March 2020

New River Valley Master Gardener Association Newsletter

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Welcome New Master Gardener Trainees!

by Sharon Eifried & Susan Perry

Welcome new trainees!

We hope you will enjoy your classes. We're sure they will be filled with helpful garden information that you will be able to pass on to the public.

Our role as Master Gardeners is one in which we have the opportunity to help educate the public and hopefully, to raise their enthusiasm about everything 'growing' and everything 'gardening'.

Some of what we do is pass on useful, research-based information. Other times, we listen. When we do, sometimes we get lucky and learn new stuff too.

In the end, our role hopefully helps make our corner of SW Virginia a little better for everyone. We're so glad you're going to join us in that effort.

We look forward to meeting each of you at a Master Gardener event.

Plant Sale Alert

by Beth Kirby

Has anyone gone outside to see what is popping out of the ground? The past few warm days and sunshine have really brought the garden back to life. I have been walking around and have found sedum, oregano, columbine, monarda and bellflowers surging out of the ground.

Now is the time to plan what needs to be divided or moved. My oregano has reseeded over into a drainage tile—certainly not a great place as far as I am concerned. So it is destined for the plant sale in May. The columbine is getting crowded. I will move a few but the rest go to the plant sale. The bellflower has crept into the horse pasture—gotta go—to the plant sale. The huge chunks of sedum need to be divided—I have plenty- so to the plant sale it goes.

The huge coleus gifted to the plant sale last fall has now given up about 30 cuttings. My hanging baskets that I overwintered have given up several black sweet potato vine cuttings.

The plant sale is May 9 at the Government Center in Cburg. 9-2. This year we will be doing a hybrid indoor/outdoor venue to be able to spread out our fabulous plants. We will be highlighting natives and pollinators. With the news that Blacksburg is now a Monarch habitat, we will put a focus there also.

We had our first plant sale meeting on Feb 2 with many 2019 graduates participating. YEAH! We always encourage participation by all members, but really like to see the newer MG's get involved. We are always looking for members who are willing to get their hands (or garden gloves) dirty by scouting out gardens for specimens and those willing to help with the pre-sale organization.

It takes an army of volunteers to put this thing together, starting NOW. Come be a part of a great fundraiser so we can continue to increase our funds for the area community grants. Email me at nrvmgplantsale@hotmail.com, call 230-8064 if you are interested in doing, learning and sharing about plants and all they have to offer.

Spring Composting Basics

by Susan Perry

Spring is a great time to begin composting for several reasons. First, one can begin gathering the ingredients for the compost pile during spring cleanup. In addition, homemade compost is a great addition to amend soil texture and add some nutrients. Also, the warming weather makes it easier to venture outside to consistently add to, wet, and turn the pile, as well as to enable the pile to warm up. Finally, spring is a great time to begin the ultimate recycling: rather than putting yard waste and vegetative kitchen scraps into your garbage and landfill, you can return them to the landscape in a productive way. You will be surprised at how much smaller your trash bag is every week.

A compost pile consists of four elements: browns, greens, water, and air.

- Browns: dried leaves, dried grasses, and other dried yard waste
- Greens: fresh kitchen vegetable & fruit scraps, coffee & tea grounds, egg shells that you collect as you're preparing meals; old fruits, vegetables, and stale bread that you might throw in the garbage when you clean out your refrigerator
- Water
- Air

Generally, the pile should consist of alternating 6 – 8" layers of shredded browns and greens. Shredding the components to 1/2 - 1" in size will speed up the composting process (although over-shredding will have the opposite effect). Correct moisture and regularly turning the pile to add air every 3 to 5 days will also speed up the decomposition process. Remember, unshredded browns left alone in a pile outside will eventually decompose, but the addition of greens, regular turning (air), moisture, and moderate shredding of components are simply ways of speeding up the natural decomposition process.

Moisten each layer as you add it, to approximately the wetness of a wrung-out sponge. If you add too much water, the pile will start to smell; too little water will result in apparently nothing happening or a dry outside, an ashy interior, and possibly the death of the microbes necessary for the decomposition process. The best way to learn is through trial and error, remembering all "errors" can be corrected. If you've added too much water, turn the pile more often to dry it out and mix in more shredded browns. If the pile is too dry, be more generous with the greens and the water as you turn and layer the pile, and consider covering it on dry days with a tarp to keep moisture in. During extended rainy periods, cover your pile to reduce excess moisture.

No meats, oils, fats, human or pet urine/feces, whole eggs, bones, or dairy should be added as these can attract rodents. Try to avoid oak leaves which contain high tannins, large twigs and branches, and resinous wood scraps such as pine, juniper and spruce. Grass clippings can be used in limited quantities if care is taken to prevent large clumps and matting, but research shows clippings are best left on the yard to add nutrients.

Because temperatures vary in different areas of the compost pile, it is best to avoid weeds and diseased plants, as they may not be killed during the composting process. Although traditional composting recommends the addition of soil or manure as a way of adding microbes to the pile, research has shown this only adds unnecessary weight and bulk to the pile, and can become a source of pathogens. And while black and white newspaper is also considered a traditional component, modern recycling is a more effective method of disposing of newspaper than composting. Finally, it is best to avoid adding any yard waste that has had pesticides or herbicides applied.

Locate the pile in an area that has partial or dappled shade and that is somewhat protected from drying winds. Other considerations in locating your pile are proximity to regular water, appearance and local covenants, space to move around as you turn or aerate the pile, and convenience for moving components in, and finished compost out, of the area. Regardless of where you locate your pile, you are seeking a balance of natural heat and moisture versus drying out in sun and wind. A less-desirable location may simply mean you need to water or turn more frequently.

Many people build their own compost bins, while others purchase them. In either case, once you have created a pile of adequate volume (approximately 3'x3'x3'), it should heat up within several days. Slightly smaller volume piles can also be effective, given the correct conditions and management. Within 4 – 6 weeks, your pile should stop showing signs of activity. You should allow it to cure for another 2 – 4 weeks before using it as a soil amendment or a mulch/top-dressing. If your cured compost has large particles, they can be sifted out before use.

For additional information, consult VCE Publication 426-703.

Saying Goodbye (or 'So Long')

For those who haven't heard through the usual grapevine, Master Gardener Kathleen Jones will be leaving the area and starting a new adventure on Long Island, NY. Kathleen (or 'KJ' to those who know her well) can fill you in on the details. But be sure to wish her well before we get too far into summer because she could be gone before we know it.

May the wind be at your back and the road rise up to meet you. Bon voyage! The best is yet to come.

Travels With Paige

by Erica Jones

Paige (my faithful canine) and I got to return to a very funky, much underused area southeast of Richmond. Dutch Gap is a Conservation Area along the James River. It got its name during the Civil War when a regiment of Union black soldiers were put to work trying to dig out a short section of land for the purpose of creating a channel to bypass the winding James River. The “gap” got finished after the civil war ended (and they dredged out the loosened soil which dynamite left behind in the river) and is now the official direct route of the James.

What is left is a large area of swamp and oxbow-like lakes and slivers of land. Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fishery (DGIF) advertises it as a great place to bird watch and hunt waterfowl. There is actually a blue heron rookery on the property. Due to lack of development, it is also a fun place to hunt for older large trees native to the transition area between the Piedmont Plateau and the Coastal Plain. The trees at the Dutch Gap Conservation Area are growing in a range of soils from very poorly drained to dry hummocks.

Dutch Gap Conservation Area also sits smack-dab next to a very large Dominion coal fired power plant. What comes when you burn coal is coal-ash? Driving out to the parking area you scoot past acres (about 70) of an industrial dump area covered with plastic and surrounded by imposing fences.

November is a good time of year to brush up on your barks (tree, not dog) and tree fruits. Leaves are still at least underfoot for ID purposes, and barks are much more visible.

Some good native trees for bark(s):

Betula nigra - river or black birch. Catkins not obvious in November. Very “peely.”

Platanus occidentalis - sycamore or plane tree. Bark on older parts of the tree can look very much less scaly but like more normal “bark”; so look up if an older tree.

Celtis laevigata – sugar hackberry. These were probably this species given that this is bottomland. There were large groves of this tree.

Pinus strobus – Eastern white pine. Yes, our very common friend, the white pine gets very impressive bark with advanced age. (Was this really a white pine???)

Liquidambar styraciflua - sweet gum. Has deep furrowed bark but furrows run more vertically than the cross country ski tracks common on hickory (or less so on black gum) Fruiting bodies are easy to spot in November.

Asimina triloba – pawpaw. Pawpaw fruits are avidly consumed by residents, so the shiny flat large dark seeds are found in feces. Bark is smooth with funky lenticels. Trees tend to grow in coverts/flocks/mobs. Leaves very large and fairly distinctive.

Fishing, camping, bird watching and boating are available at Dutch Gap Conservation Area, along with 5.8 miles of walking trails. See www.chesterfield.gov for detailed information.

The Story of Making Christiansburg Beautiful

by Sharon Eifried



On February 4th, 2020, Master Gardeners were treated to a wonderful presentation given by horticulturist, Michael Huesman, a graduate of Virginia Tech, who is the Right of Way Supervisor for the town of Christiansburg. In this position, he designs and supervises the maintenance of the flowers, trees, and shrubs throughout the town.

Michael uses 3D imagery to plan the contents of the flower boxes, hanging baskets, annual beds, perennial beds, and the placement of trees and shrubs. Two of his go-to plants last year were elephant ears for annual beds and sweet potato vines for hanging baskets. Knock Out roses were planted at the ends of annual beds in order to provide year round enjoyment. Bulbs are planted in the perennial beds. One of Michael's goals is to have year round interest by selecting plants for every season.

Watering can be a challenge for such an extensive area. New plants receive straight water for the first two weeks. In the third week, routine watering takes over which includes addition of a weakened 20-20-20 fertilizer every week. Throughout the season, straight water is used one week of every month.

A second challenge reported by Michael is working with a small crew, especially when it comes to planting 6000 annuals in a period of two weeks. It is always good to have people on board who are interested in horticulture to work alongside those who mow, care for the grass, and work with hardscape. Staff training and development are a priority.

The compact clay soil in this area also presents a challenge. The soil in the beds needs to be amended every year with peat and vermiculite. Plants are also composted. Michael discussed being careful to not mulch too close to tree trunks nor too deep. At one point pansies were being planted in one foot of mulch!

I look forward to touring Christiansburg during the coming year. New trees have been planted and Michael is busy designing and dreaming. Seeing the dream come true is about to happen.

Springing into Action

by Susan Perry

February through April is a great time to get a jump on a variety of garden chores. Mid to late February is an excellent time to prune many deciduous trees and shrubs. Warm periods in March and April provide an opportunity to clean away garden debris, re-position perennials, and get an early start eliminating weeds. Finally, be sure to give your garden, trees and shrubs, and lawn a good winter watering during long periods of warm, dry weather.

The best time to prune most deciduous trees and shrubs is during their dormant season, January and February. Regular maintenance pruning, done correctly, will improve both the health and appearance of your trees. It is best to begin a regimen of pruning when the tree is firmly established (say two years old) but only on branches less than two inches in diameter. Thinning cuts, which remove a branch back to the parent branch or trunk, are the best technique to use to encourage an attractive natural-looking form, to create healthy growth, and to improve natural defenses against disease and decay. For further information on correct pruning techniques and when to prune what – timing of pruning is very important for some flowering shrubs -- please refer to VCE publications 430-459, 430-460, and 430-462. Additional information about pruning crepe myrtles, peach trees, apple trees, evergreens, and more is available from VCE.

Although the NRV can receive snow in March, we typically do not experience harsh, extremely cold temperatures at this time. Although yard debris acts as a protective covering during extreme cold, the wet snows of March perform the same insulating function. As a result, cleaning away garden debris on the warm days during this time is something that can be done without harming perennials. It also has the added benefit of freeing-up time in May for other garden activities instead of spending time cleaning up debris. Finally, although it would be unwise to plant new, un-hardened perennials in March or April, spring is a good time to reposition existing perennials, weather depending.

Early spring is an excellent time to eliminate weeds. Whether the weed is an annual grassy weed, a perennial weedy grass, or a broadleaf weed, the best time to apply an herbicide is when the weed is actively growing because the herbicide will be most effectively absorbed. The active growth periods are spring and fall, when the weeds are absorbing nutrients for growth or over-wintering. Hopefully, they will also be absorbing the herbicide you apply! For more information on weed control, please refer to VCE publications 430-532 and 426-364.

With your simple garden chores completed before May, you will have a head start on this year's gardening season.

United States Botanic Garden Revisited

by Erica Jones

I have admittedly been avoiding DC for the last 20 years, but this past summer I was able to spend two nights there in mid-August. We traveled north by train and came back along the east coast.

The last time I was in DC, the US Botanic Garden was redoing the west side of the exterior and there were piles of dirt and excavating equipment at the entrance area. This time all was peaceful, complete, and impressive. (How DID they get their trees to grow so much in 19 years?). This part is called the National Garden; it covers some three acres.

I was extremely impressed that the Federal Government was putting in landscaping that supports pollinators, pond insects, natives, and particularly, provided shade. Natives from the mid-Atlantic Piedmont and coastal plain were particularly highlighted. Paths were winding. Plants were labeled (mostly); I swear they updated plant ID labels during the year so as to not clutter the beds but to identify what was currently blooming and/or of interest.



This is a shot close to the main entrance. Do you see any boxwoods???

Does this look repressively formal? Both days we were there were extremely hot, but the textured sidewalk surface did its job of not blinding us. There were also gravel paths in the less used areas; the water features were popular and the shade welcome.

I am not sure how they kept the algae growth subdued in their natural water feature but it was under control. They might have been literally fishing the algae out of their ponds; I don't know. There was this pond, and a small "creek" flowing into it. This area had the added benefit in that you had to look for it; it was tucked away in paths and trees. Surprising landscape features continue to delight the young and old. This is as far as you can get from a formal garden.





There is a more formal water feature closer to the entrance. This is called the First Lady's Water Garden. About six paths lead away from this area. It was not smack in front of the entrance, but required a small detour to get to it. Even though the area was a fairly large expanse of paved materials, the containers and the layered effect of the water surface softened the impact of the concrete.

One section of the garden was devoted to "advertising" some of the other botanic gardens in the United States. Ten major botanic gardens were represented by plants common to those areas and some written material was provided about the gardens.

One section of the garden was devoted to



Tucked away (again) in a side garden was an area expounding on some of the plant introductions that the Botanic garden has provided. My favorite was a variegated leaved cotton, which in August was full of cotton balls.

If you have more time to look at plants, one other building on the mall that provided landscaping interest was the National Museum of the American Indian - part of the Smithsonian. This building opened in 2004. The front of the building was landscaped in prairie mode – lots of tall native grasses, and being August, very tall blooming perennials (like perennial sunflowers), again, not traditional landscaping for a city building. The backside of the building was a very modern rendition of a stream water feature. One of the botanists helping with the landscaping describes it as "flowing into the building." The building is open 10AM to 5:30PM, so plan your visit so you can get inside.

This is a shot of the native fruit section (five persimmon trees were living here, all of which had way more fruit on them than my trees at home) (the middle tree is one). They also had two pawpaw trees growing nearby.



The moral here is that things sometimes improve over time. Give it a second chance! Wikipedia says that a lot of the National Garden renovations came from a "Friends" group which was formed to help with the finances.

Winter Blooms for Indoor Gardening

by Sharon Eifried

One day I looked around my great room and noticed some lovely plants, some with blooms, brightening up my world. Outdoors was pretty cold, drab, and often rainy this year, but indoors I was greeted with an array of blossoms. I have three walls of windows in the great room, so my plants get a significant amount of light. In summer there is less direct light because of the many trees on the property. I try to water every week, but if the truth be known I water when I notice the philodendron and the purple shamrocks are drooping.

Below are some pictures and information about the indoor plants that I am enjoying. Some bloom all year long, but the blooms are especially welcome in the winter months.

The yellow orchid pictured is a Phalaenopsis orchid (moth orchid), purchased in the grocery store and set aside when it finished blooming. I moved it to a place where it gets diffused light, and just ignored it most of the time, except for the occasional watering. Then, one week in February when I was watering it, I noticed a beautiful new bloom. These orchids do best in sphagnum moss in a clay or plastic pot. The plant should be watered when it is almost dry. Do not let it dry out and avoid water in the crown. This orchid blooms between January and March (unless forced) and flowers last approximately 3 months. In order to optimize the chance of blooming it is good to provide 3 weeks of 50 degree nights.



My pink Thanksgiving cactus has bloomed several times this year. Most people want to call this plant a Christmas cactus, but it always blooms at Thanksgiving! You can tell the difference between the Thanksgiving and the Christmas cacti by examining the edges of their flattened stems. The margins or edges of the stems of the Thanksgiving cactus tend to be somewhat pointed and those of the Christmas cactus are somewhat rounded. My cactus blooms so nicely at Thanksgiving because the night temperature in the fall season in my great room is cool (between 50 and 60 degrees). A cool bright location will also encourage re-blooming of this plant.



My succulents are not blooming plants, but how interesting they look! I am excited about the lovely pots that my daughter gifted me, along with several interesting succulent plants. They add wonderful interest to the winter indoor garden. My succulents do best in a sunny window. Let your plants dry out and then give them a very good soaking, making sure the water can drain out. Succulents do not like wet feet. Normal potting soil can be mixed with perlite to enhance drainage for these plants.





My purple shamrock (*Oxalis regnellii*) adds a bit of contrast to the green foliage of other plants and is often covered with clusters of tiny light pink flowers. I think it does so well in my house because it does not like overly wet soil. Fits right in with my infrequent watering. The plant grows from rhizomatous bulbs that are sometimes called "pips." This plant is known to be poisonous to cats and dogs. Outdoors this plant requires some shade, but indoors it enjoys a bright spot.

I am especially happy with my clivia (*Clivia miniata*) plant, also known as a kaffir lily. The clivia is native to South America and Swaziland and named after Lady Florentina Clive, Duchess of Northumberland. The bright orange blooms are always a welcome sight. They are known to bloom in spring, but for some reason unknown to me, mine was gorgeous this Thanksgiving. I believe it must have something to do with the amount of water the plant receives and the temperature of the room. I had this plant for several years before it became pot bound, sent several shoots off of its rhizomes, and started blooming. The variety that I have produces clusters of flowers that nestle within the beautiful thick dark-green strapping foliage.



My star begonia (*Begonia heracleifolia*) grows very large interesting leaves and produces long stems of very attractive pale pink flowers. If you place this plant outdoors in warm weather it requires some shade; indoors year-round it needs bright light. Because the soil needs to drain well, adding some peat is recommended.

Perhaps next year you will try some of these plants to add interest to your indoor winter garden. I promise you will not be disappointed.



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