

The Grapevine

December 2023

New River Valley Master Gardener Association Newsletter

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What a Fabulous Master Gardener Year

by Wendy Silverman

It's December, which means holiday time -- a time to celebrate with our friends and family as well as a time to celebrate all that we have accomplished this year. How do we know about all of the hard work we have done? Beginning the first week in January, I start crunching the numbers. I gather data from Better Impact and our contact sheets from all of our plant clinics and programs and report them to each county in the NRV. Then they are sent to their county administrators and to the state coordinator's office, which in turn sends them to the state legislature. I can't do this without your help.

Please finish entering in your hours by December 31. That way, I can do the data, report our findings, and celebrate all that we have accomplished. We need to let the state lawmakers know all of the fantastic gardening programs we do and all the people we help.

I appreciate every one of you and the many contributions you make to the program.

Please finish entering your data into Better Impact by December 31st. The link is <https://app.betterimpact.com/login>. Thank you all! And let's celebrate us!!!!



Wendy Silverman

Grow It and They Will Come

by Ashley Johnson

I spent the month of August 2022 working side-by-side with an amazing local Girl Scout, Jasmyn Charlton. She has been an active Girl Scout for many years and was ready to complete her silver award project. Jasmyn is also our beloved babysitter so early that summer, while she was at our house, she and I were brainstorming ideas that would help the community and could be completed in a short timeline for her silver award.

I introduced Jasmyn to Dr. Doug Tallamy and the critical need for native plants. She thought a gardening-related project could be fun so we set our plan into motion in the Great Little Park. The NRV chapter of the Native Plant Society offers project grants on a quarterly basis, so we submitted our proposal and were thrilled to receive a check. Next was plant research and shopping.

Jasmyn learned that using only plants native to Virginia in a garden design adds a bit more challenge and requires diligent research. We visited: Crow's Nest in Blacksburg, Pine Ridge in Salem, Wood Thrush Natives in Floyd, the big box stores, and even traveled to Catlett, Virginia (between Warrenton and Manassas) to visit Owl Run (wholesale) Nursery. We ended up with a nice collection of plants and then set to work getting them in the ground. All in, she had easily met the 50 hour minimum for her project.

The plants immediately looked better than the empty beds, but I knew the big impact wouldn't happen until the following year (and beyond). Gardening is not for the impatient!

So, back to the article title. How does this take on the *Field of Dreams* quote fit into my story?

September 2023: I stopped by the Great Little Park to assess what needed to be done on our next workday. I noticed the upper leaves were missing from the butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*). We were only able to find three little plants during our shopping trips and now they were looking rough. But upon closer inspection, this defoliation was for the best possible reason -- I found four monarch caterpillars happily munching the remaining leaves. Common Butterfly Weed is native to the entire state of Virginia and, as a member of the milkweed family, serves as a host plant for monarchs. I shrieked in excitement, startling the Great Road Coffee patrons at the nearby picnic tables who then got a surprise lesson on monarchs and host plants from me.

Creating an actual ecosystem in this little downtown space is part of the goal for the Great Little Park, but I knew it would take time. When meeting people at the park for the first time, I give them: the address, closest intersection, and often screenshot a map for them. People find it challenging to locate a female monarch that not only found her way into the Great



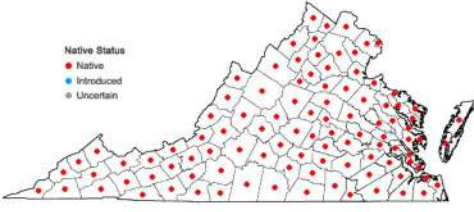
Little Park, but found those three butterfly weed plants to oviposit (that's the science-y word for insects laying eggs). All we did was plant three little plants and the monarchs did in fact come!

Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora

Home & Announcements Group Family Genus County Excluded Taxa About

Asclepias tuberosa L. var. *tuberosa*

Native Status
● Native
● Introduced
● Uncertain



[Show image with county labels](#)

Detail

Family
Apocynaceae

Botanical Name
Asclepias tuberosa L. var. *tuberosa*

Common Name
Butterfly-weed, Common Butterfly-weed

The caterpillars were so big and healthy looking. Based on their size and other characteristics, I believe they were 5th instar caterpillars, which is the final stage before pupating. They had found the protection and nourishment necessary to survive from tiny eggs all the way to big, fat caterpillars in our Great Little Park. Native insects utilizing our native plants. We're living the ecological dream!

I looked carefully for chrysalis but never located any. I'm hopeful they were just well hidden and these little critters made it all the way to adult butterfly. Maybe they're currently enjoying life in the mountains of Mexico (while I'm freezing here in the New River Valley of Virginia). While feeling a bit jealous of the migrating creatures, I'm also already anxious for the 2024 growing season. Hoping for even more monarch caterpillars in our Great Little Park and maybe next year, we'll also attract some native Eastern Black Swallowtail since we have their host plant, Golden Alexander, also happily growing in the park. I've also harvested some seeds, so hopefully we can share butterfly weed plants next spring and offer some during our NRVMGA Spring Plant Sale (that Beth Kirby will happily remind you is May 11, 2024 – put it on your calendar).

So, whatever space you're working in - there is room for native plants that in turn benefit our native insects and our world. Plant it... they will come!



All photos: Ashley Johnson

From the President

by Sarah Smiley

Can you believe this is the last newsletter for 2023? Where has the year gone? It seems that not long ago, it was January and the Board was meeting to plan its work for 2023. We agreed on the key goals for 2023: updating the association's structure, improving outreach to members and the public, and creating more social opportunities for members. To meet those goals, the Association Bylaws and Standing Rules were updated and approved, and the website has been updated. Board minutes are shared with members, as well as activities updates (and Wendy's great work continues on that front). It's been great to have members sit in on the Board meetings, which are held both via Zoom and in-person, in hopes of encouraging more participation.

We've also been using the website and the Association Facebook (FB) page to keep the public more informed of our work and tell the story of who we are and what we do. If you have photos of your projects, please share them with us for the FB page.

As usual, our members assisted with the Master Gardener (MG) College and for the first time, we hosted a field trip for MG College participants to Pulaski on the topic of therapeutic gardening. On the social front, the new book club has been going well and the educational events this year were enjoyed by many. We are always open to and appreciate any ideas, comments, or feedback you may have.

We also had record-breaking earnings from the plant sale this year (over \$10,000), as well as a record number of grant applications received (over \$20,000). These achievements resulted from the hard work of members over the years. As members conduct their excellent project work and (hopefully) tell their friends (tell your friends! Spread the word!) about the Master Gardener program, we'll grow the program and be able to serve more communities throughout our area.

Looking forward to 2024, besides all of the projects Wendy will be finding for us, we will be hosting the Virginia Master Gardener Association in April. Of course, we will be working with Beth Kirby on the annual May Plant Sale (Beth is already sending out emails about planning your planting/repotting/overwintering – *always read her emails*).

The election for officers for the Board is coming up – watch your email for the e-voting form. If anyone wants to serve on the Board, you are warmly welcome to run for an office. This isn't a country club – anyone who wants a leadership position, or just wants experience serving on a non-profit Board, put your name in for consideration.

Technically, according to the new bylaws, the nominations for the voting slate were due on November 13, but maybe you've given it more thought! If not this year, then think about next year. We'd love to have you and you'd have a wealth of support from past and current board members. The Association benefits from new ideas and different experiences and we are fortunate to have such a talented, and interesting, group of folks in the MG program. ***Speaking of talented members - if anyone would like to take over being webmaster, please let me know!***

Many thanks to you, the Board, Wendy, and Meredith for a great year. Happy Holidays!

Problem + Solution All in One!

by Ashley Johnson

It's not often that I can capture both the problem AND the solution in one single photo.

Here are my "Harvest of Memories" yellow iris, one of the reblooming varieties that send up flower stalks in spring and again later in fall.

On the left side of the flower, you can see a number of green aphids. On the right side, there is a ladybug waiting to attack. Between the flower and the leaves, there is also a stretched web with a spider, hopefully waiting its turn to feast. Pest management services at their best!



Ashley Johnson, insect photographer who was supposed to be hauling leaves to the garden and labeling dahlias

Holiday Simmer Pot and Composting

by Sarah Smiley

I have been seeing a lot about "simmer pots" in social media lately. It is always fun when things you've been doing for years are suddenly a trend. I've been doing this for years as a way to make the house smell great as well as boil down citrus rind to add to the compost bin. (I know, I know, some people are firm believers that citrus should NOT go into the compost, but it has never proved to be a problem for mine.)

There is no set recipe. If I am cooking with citrus, I take the left-over rinds (lemon, orange, grapefruit, lime, etc), and throw them into a large pot of water. I'll usually add a couple of black peppercorns, some fresh or dried sage, and any other herb I have on hand. Bring it to a boil and then reduce to a simmer, add water as needed so the pot doesn't boil dry. After a day or two and once the pot has cooled, you simply drain, take it out to your compost bin, and pour it in. As you know with compost, you must be mindful of the ratios of what you are adding in. Too much of anything is always a problem.



For the holidays, I like to add some fresh evergreens and even apple peels into the pot. You do not need much to have the house smelling like a Christmas tree. Have fun with it!

Poisonous Plants for Pets (Perennials, Bushes, and Trees)

by Emma Patterson

Question: You love your pets **and** you love your perennials – do those loves have to be mutually exclusive? The short answer is No. Still, it helps to know which plants to grow with pooches and pussycats around and when to steer your pets away from ones that could cause a lot of harm. Typically, minor reactions are gastro-intestinal problems, drooling, or dermatitis. More severe reactions are listed below. The APSCA notes that when dogs or cats eat “any plant material,” it “may cause vomiting and gastrointestinal upset” (emphasis in the original)¹. Many of the plants listed below are also toxic to horses.

Some of the poisonous plants are natives to Virginia, marked with *. A few commonalities of plants from the list below include fruit trees in the apple, apricot, plum, and cherry families; perennials growing from bulbs, rhizomes, or tubers; and tropical plants that are outdoors in warmer months and inside in the winter. If your pet accidentally eats one of these plants, the Animal Poison Control Center's 24-hour emergency poison hotline is 888-426-4435.

Poisonous to Cats and Dogs

Aloe Vera (Liliaceae)	Asparagus fern (Asparagus densiflorus cv sprengeri)	Caladium / Elephant Ear (Caladium hortulanum)
Amaryllis (Hippeastrum spp.)	*Azalea (Rhododendron spp.)	Calla lily (Zantedeschia aethiopica)
*American Bittersweet (Celastrus scandens)	Bird of Paradise/ Poinciana (Caesalpinia gilliesii)	Carnation (Dianthus caryophyllus)
Apples and crabapples (Malus sylvestrus) - stems, leaves, seeds contain cyanide.	Black Laurel (Leucothoe spp.) - ingestion of a few leaves can cause serious problems.	Chamomile (Anthemis nobilis) – long-term use can lead to bleeding tendencies.
Apricots (Prunus armeniaca) and cherry (*Prunus serotina and spp, *Prunus virginiana), plums (Prunus domestica), and peaches (Prunus persica) - stems, leaves, seeds contain cyanide.	*Black Walnut (Juglans nigra)	Chrysanthemum (Chrysanthemum spp.) and daisies
	Boxwood (Buxus spp)	Coleus (Coleus amponicus)
	*Buckeye or chestnut (Aesculus glabra)	Corn Plant (Dracaena fragrans)
	Buttercup (Ranunculus spp.)	

¹ <https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/toxic-and-non-toxic-plants>

Crocus (<i>Colchicum autumnale</i>) – can lead to oral irritation, bloody vomiting, diarrhea, shock, multi-organ damage, bone marrow suppression.	and lips, excessive drooling, difficulty swallowing.	Paradise tree (<i>Melia azedarach</i>)
Cyclamen (<i>Cyclamen spp</i>) - following large ingestions of tubers: heart rhythm abnormalities, seizures.	Jade (<i>Crassula arborescens</i>)	Peony (<i>Paeonis officinalis</i>)
Daffodil (<i>Narcissus spp</i>)	Japonica bush (<i>Pieris japonica</i>) - depression, cardiovascular collapse, hypersalivation, weakness, coma, low blood pressure, cardiovascular collapse.	Periwinkle (<i>Vinca rosea</i>)
Dieffenbachia (<i>Dieffenbachia picta</i>)	*Larkspur (<i>Delphinium</i>) - alkaloids in the plant cause neuromuscular paralysis; clinical effects include constipation, colic, increased salivation, muscle tremors, stiffness, weakness, recumbency, and convulsions.	Philodendron (<i>Philodendron oxycardium</i>)
English ivy (<i>Hedera helix</i>)	*Laurel (<i>Kalmia latifolia</i>)	Poinsettia (<i>Euphorbia pulcherrima</i>) - irritating to the mouth and stomach.
Foxglove (<i>Digitalis purpurea</i>) – can cause cardiac arrhythmias, weakness.	Lavender (<i>Lavendula angustifolia</i>)	Poison Ivy, Oak, and Sumac
Geranium (<i>Pelargonium</i>) – can cause vomiting, anorexia, depression, dermatitis.	*Lily of the Valley (<i>Convallaria majalis</i>)	Pothos (<i>Epipremnum aureum</i>)
Hellebore (<i>Helleborus niger</i>)	*Lobelium (<i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>) – can cause depression, diarrhea, vomiting, excessive salivation, abdominal pain, heart rhythm disturbances.	Primrose (<i>Primula vulgaris</i>)
*Holly (<i>Ilex opaca</i>)	*Locust (<i>Robinia spp.</i>)	Privet (<i>Ligustrum vulgare</i>)
Hosta (<i>Hosta plataginea</i>)	Macadamia (<i>Macadamia integrifolia</i>) – can cause depression, weakness of limbs, tremors.	Purslane (<i>Portulaca oleracea</i>)
Hyacinth (<i>Hyacinthus orientalis</i>) - bulbs contain highest amount of toxin.	Marjoram (<i>Origanum majorana</i>)	Rhubarb (<i>Rheum rhabarbarium</i>) - vomiting, salivation in dogs/cats. Most toxic are leaves and roots.
*Hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea arborescens</i>) - vomiting, depression, diarrhea. Cyanide intoxication is rare.	Mayapple (<i>Podophyllum peltatum</i>)	Snake plant (<i>Sansevieria trifasciata</i>)
*Inch plant (<i>Tradescantia flumenensis</i>)	*Milkweed (<i>Asclepias</i>)	*St Johns Wort (<i>Hypericum perforatum</i>)
*Iris - salivation, vomiting, drooling, lethargy, diarrhea.	Oleander (<i>Nerium oleander</i>)	Tulip (<i>Tulipa spp.</i>) – can lead to vomiting, depression, diarrhea, hypersalivation.
*Jack in the Pulpit (<i>Arisaema triphyllum</i>) - oral irritation, pain and swelling of mouth, tongue		Wisteria (<i>Wisteria spp.</i>)
		*Yarrow (<i>Achillea millefolium</i>) – can cause increased urination.
		Yellow Oleander (<i>Thevetia peruviana</i>)
		Yew (<i>Taxus canadensis</i>)
		*Yucca (<i>Yucca spp.</i>)

A Real County Fair

by Erica Jones

As Master Gardeners, hopefully some of you have judged at fairs. This is a real exercise in group work, stating your mind, and making quick decisions. Being willing to compromise definitely helps.

I was invited to judge at the Highland County Fair this summer. Highland County is the least populated county in Virginia, according to the 2021 census figures; but you sure would not know that by the participation in their fair. I live in the third smallest by population county in Virginia, and we do not even HAVE a county fair. The Highland County Fair was held at the combined elementary-high school building (the only public school in the county). The grounds were very nicely planted in blooming perennials. Highland County is in the north-west corner of the state.

The other judge I was paired with had done more judging and knew her stuff better than I did. We got through the enormous 'pile' of baked goods by being willing to compromise when we did not agree on first place. Basically, we would take turns at placing those classes where we did not agree; but luckily those classes were amazingly few.

Picking 'best in show' was fun. We had both marked a few entries we wanted to see again. When we looked at the six or so baked goods entries, it took both of us about eight seconds to agree on the same choice. Deal!!!

Highland County's fair had the most entries of vegetables, cut flowers, and baked goods I have seen at any county fair in years. Their flower arrangements were a bit fewer than some ... maybe because one of their residents had professional capabilities in arranging and was suppressing competition. Or maybe all the available cut flowers were in the individual judging classes! As with probably every county fair, they were still trying to recover from COVID, putting a damper on enthusiasm for entering. But organizers said total entries in everything were up from last year.



From the 'most unusual vegetable' judging category: this is so unusual that I do not know what it is.

The 2024 fair will be held again in Monterey, Virginia on the weekend closest to Labor Day. Monterey is 2 ½ hours from Richmond and three hours from Dulles airport. MGers In Suffolk get to drive diagonally right across the state for four plus hours.



Another 'most unusual vegetable:' these are tiny cucumbers.



This arrangement won third place. The judges might have had reasons not obvious to the casual observer. All photos: Erica Jones

Last Book Club for 2023

by Ashley Johnson

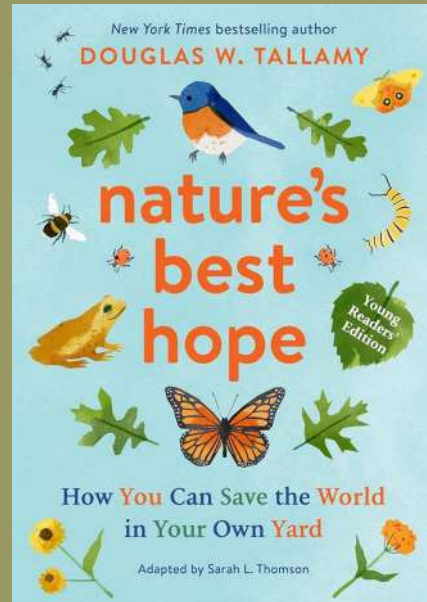
This Saturday - December 2nd from 3:30 - 5pm

Moon Hollow Brewery
4237 Price's Fork Road
Blacksburg, VA 24060

Book:
Nature's Best Hope (Young Readers Edition)
by Doug Tallamy

Everyone welcome! Whether you've finished the book or haven't even started it yet, guaranteed great conversation and learning from other Master Gardeners.

Last Book Club gathering for 2023 -- don't miss it!



Flower Memories

by Liz Swiften

I have many passed-along plants or ones with happy memories. Here are two before the frost gets them.

I bought the Shooting Star Hydrangea from the Philadelphia Flower show in 2018. Reminds me of Lisa (Lloyd) Heckert now in Chesterfield, VA. and Linda Davis now in Denver, CO., who were both on the trip.

The orange dahlia was an exchange from Carol Trutt.



Photos: Liz Swiften

Rhubarb

by Erica Jones, with help from Paige

Well, I think I have officially arrived as a 'gardener.' Or at least, I have figured out how to grow rhubarb - finally. Admittedly, it has probably been a good rhubarb year here; but I am taking full credit for wising up.

My previous effort suffered from two problems - not enough fertilizer and not enough space. When my vegetable garden expanded into stepped beds on the slope, I slapped two purchases in the lower, full sun part. The vegetables are closer to my main source of fertilizer than the flower bed is: the laying hens. So, every spring I scrape out some chicken poop and dump it under the leaves of the rhubarb. Chicken (manure) rates the 'highest NPK of any animal manures.' Yeah, you can burn plants with it, so just keep a little distance away from your plants. But it works wonders. Chicken manure rates N .5 - .9 %, P .4-.5%, and K 1.2-1.7% according to Wikipedia.

My other cultural improvements are space and weed removal. I am up to four plants with all the elbow room they want, and very little weed competition. Rhubarb is good at naturally keeping down weeds given their production of heavy shade under the plants. The leaves, when you cut them, make an amusing mulch. (Be careful with the leaves around pets and people. Please refer to articles in this issue by Emma & Rona.)

As an aside, I spotted rhubarb on my trip to Iceland but it looked a little different. It is not native there but was introduced, probably around 1880. Obviously, the climate there is like the ultimate rhubarb factory, so the plants may have been just suffering from intense happiness. Gardeners in Iceland do not dead head plants religiously as we do, so the stuff spreads by seed.



Photo: Erica Jones

Recipe – Rhubarb Pie – 9”

Wash and dice 3-4 cups of rhubarb stalk. I substitute 1 cup with 1 cup diced apple. Cut apples very small, as rhubarb cooks faster.

Mix these three together before mixing in fruit.

- 1 cup sugar (or less) (1 cup is LOTS)
- Flour 4 T
- 1 egg well beaten

Pie crust: use any flour/fat/salt/water recipe you prefer. My mother made a lattice work top, I guess because the pie is pretty juicy. Serious holes in the top crust work too.

Bake at 425°F for 8 minutes; then, lower heat to 325°F for another 30 minutes.

Chestnut Update from Master Gardener College by Erica Jones

The chestnut blight arrived in the US, or was first discovered, in 1904. The blight traveled some 24 miles a year. Pennsylvania was so desperate to save their chestnut trees that they bulldozed a path across the state to try to prevent the blight from going south. By 1925, the blight was in the Blue Ridge Parkway; and by 1950, the chestnut was 'functionally extinct.'

The leaves look a lot like chestnut oak. Chestnut leaves are 5-9" long and 1 ½ - 3" wide – narrow, oblong-shaped, and pointed. Chestnut oak leaves are described 4-8" long and 2-4" wide -- elliptical. The leaves on a chinquapin (which have almost disappeared in our woods; they also get the blight but live longer with it) have a similar shape, but overall smaller (3-6" long) than (both) chestnuts and chestnut oak leaves. There are also groups trying to breed blight resistant chinquapins. Chinquapins have much smaller fruit than chestnuts and are a smaller tree.

The American Chestnut Foundation is trying two breeding approaches to get a blight-resistant chestnut that has fruit more similar to the American chestnut (than to the less tasty, but bigger Chinese chestnut). Trying to find naturally resistant populations, as best I can tell, has not been successful.

One breeding approach is multiple back crosses: starting with a cross between the two species and then breeding those results back to the American chestnut. The Foundation is offering 4-generation-back-cross seeds. They hope to retain blight-resistance from the first cross, but the multiple back crosses with the native chestnut should produce results closer to the American chestnut flavor. Since a tree requires eight years to mature and bear fruit, it is a fairly slow process to get through four crosses. Most of these trees will have blight-resistance, but obviously not all.

The second approach to producing a quantity of blight-resistant trees is to produce them by genetic engineering. Originally, it was thought there were only three genes involved in blight-resistance (in the Chinese tree); it is now known that it involves more genes. This approach produces a transgenic plant by borrowing a gene produced by some wheat varieties, to neutralize oxalic acid produced by the blight fungus into water and hydrogen peroxide. Several other plants have this capability - like bananas and strawberries. So, the trees will still have the blight - the blight is not killed, just controlled. Because this would be a genetically modified organism planted in the wild, USDA has been very careful about approving planting trees for planting in the wild. The audience was told approval MIGHT come as early as this year.

Researchers have studied tadpole survival in puddles lined with transgenic chestnut leaves; bumble bees and pollen, leaf decomposition, native plants growth rates when grown next to the trees; and others factors. Are the introduction risks worth it? I think so but....

The American Chestnut Foundation offices are in Asheville, NC. You will be mailed four seeds for a \$300 donation, and six seeds for a \$500 donation.

Penn State has a picture of what our woods looked like pre-blight: <https://extension.psu.edu/from-the-woods-american-chestnut>.

My Lawn is Gone

by Gwen Ewing

We used to have oak and pine trees in our front and back yard, with a bit of grass. I've been known to push-mow the grass until the wheel fell off or until the push mower won't crank. Then we read the Lawn Gone article in the March/April 2023 Readers' Digest by Dan Zak. In this article, Dan suggests you dig up your turf/lawn and replant with natives. Well, my husband Mike took that article to heart because he was tired of mowing, of the water consumption, the price of gas, the air pollution, and the time it takes to grow and maintain grass.

Why?

- Watering a lawn for an hour can use more than 1,000 gallons of water, which can add up to billions of gallons a day across the USA. Turf is planted on more acreage (40 million) than any other irrigated crop in the US.
- The Department of Transportation estimates that in 2018, gas powered lawn mowers, leaf blowers, and other garden equipment used almost 3 billion gallons of gas. That doesn't include any accidental spills! They also cause air pollution.
- Chemicals required for 'the perfect lawn' also have a negative effect on our environment. The fertilizer required by turf is 10 times what is needed for our agricultural crops. Runoff from our lawns carries this fertilizer into our rivers and beyond, with negative downstream effects.
- In addition to fertilizers, we use about 40,000 tons of pesticide and herbicide products on our lawns each year. These can kill beneficial insects and plants, while upsetting the food chain.

A Quick Historical Detour

The first grass lawn was constructed in the garden of Versailles, initially by Louis XIII but expanded significantly under the command of King Louis XIV. There were many things built during his reign at Versailles: the Orangerie, the Ménagerie, and the Grand Canal. The stretch of grass lawn, about 130 feet wide and 1100 feet long, was envisioned as a green carpet. Called the Royal Alley, the Royal Way, the Royal Walk, or the Great Lawn, it was maintained by gardeners who 'mowed' by walking in a line, swinging scythes in unison. Much of what was built during his reign reflected Louis' immense power and wealth, and at Versailles, the installation and maintenance of gardens and lawn did too.

Taking their cue from Louis XIV and other Europeans of wealth and power, both Thomas Jefferson and George Washington installed lawns at Monticello and Mount Vernon, encouraging the popularity of green lawns among the wealthy.

Whether you were European royalty 300 years ago or are a suburbanite today, we are told the perfect lawn symbolizes success. Anyone who wants to buck that idea, please feel free to join me!

This article says to improve your physical and mental health, stop worrying that your lawn that isn't like the neighbors or isn't golf tournament ready. Instead, dig up the turf, plant natives, and relax watching your gardens grow. To do this, consider

combining existing, small islands of plants in your yard into one big island of natives.

Replacing your turf with native perennials and wildflowers, native grasses, native ferns, and native shrubs and trees will allow you to reclaim some of the time you previously invested in your lawn. You'll have more time to relax and watch your neighbors admiring your new yard. Using natives generally means less irrigation, nutrients, and chemicals since these plants are adapted to our climate and soils.

If you don't want to fill your lawn with flowers, you can replace turf with low-growing groundcovers like sedges, thyme, phlox, or sedum, and ferns. An excellent & very recent resource was just released that can be helpful in your plant selection process. Called *A Guide to Gardening with Southwest Virginia Native Plants*, it is being given away at some local public libraries or can be downloaded for free at: https://nrvrc.org/images/pdf/Plant%20SWVA%20Natives%20Guide_web.pdf

Xeriscaping is a fancy word for a yard that needs little to no water. Popular in desert or low-precipitation areas, it can be utilized here, if you carefully select plants that are drought-tolerant but will not drown if we have a rainy year. These plants can be incorporated into an expanded hardscape plan of rocks, gravel, and mulch.

Caution: Don't just quit mowing like we did. I recommend you start small, have a plan for your yard, start with a border full of wildflowers, and add a raised vegetable bed.

Make sure the part of your lawn that is visible from the street looks well-maintained. This can happen by having it neatly trimmed and edged, and by creating wide obvious walkways between your beds for you and a companion to walk side by side. Create spaces to place your chairs for an early morning coffee or to read a book.

Today, we have no manicured lawn. We're now putting in walkable pathways because you never know when a weed will pop up. And I vote no brambles near the walkways, mostly because my husband Mike likes raspberries and blackberries and gets VERY angry when I cut the canes because they snag my clothes and skin.

So, check out the websites in the list below and plan on making your lawn be gone!

'Lawn-Free Front Yards Are Trending—Here's Why' <https://www.realsimple.com/lawn-free-front-yards-7554725>

'More Sustainable (and Beautiful) Alternatives to a Grass Lawn' <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/more-sustainable-and-beautiful-alternatives-grass-lawn>

'Why Meadowsclaping Is the Hot New Lawn Trend' <https://www.realsimple.com/why-meadowsclaping-is-the-hot-new-lawn-trend-7570118>

'These Are the Top Gardening Trends for 2023' <https://www.realsimple.com/gardening-trends-2023-7112567>

'Wildflower Meadow Instead of Grass' <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2023/09/15/wildflower-meadow-lawn-grass-vermont/>

'Build a Meadow' <https://www.washingtonpost.com/home/2023/06/21/backyard-meadow-native-plants/>

Florida With RuthAnn and Olin

by Ruth Ann Whitener

Early this fall Olin and I were in Boca Raton, Florida, with our second son's (Jason) family. We enjoyed some grandparenting time while Jason and Kristy went on a second honeymoon trip to celebrate their 25th anniversary and her 50th birthday! Before they left, they offered to take us to the Morikami Museum and Japanese Gardens in Delray Beach, FL. Kristy had wanted to take us there for years and we were all finally able to go and appreciate the lovely gardens and museum. It is easy to Google this amazing garden and museum but it's not the same as being there. The beauty takes one's breath away literally!

Mr. Morikami himself was known as a benevolent man. He also planted pineapple fields!

If you are ever near Delray Beach, FL, it's worth it to plan some time to visit this amazing site. I will let the pictures we took tell the story.





Photos: Ruth Ann Whitener

Toxic Plant Awareness

by Rona Vrooman

Have you seen the publication *The Socrates Project: Poisonous Plants in Virginia*? Published by the University of Virginia, it is a collaborative effort between the Virginia Master Naturalist Program and Virginia Cooperative Extension. An updated version is available online, free, at <https://med.virginia.edu/brpc/wp-content/uploads/sites/274/2021/01/SOCRATES-PROJECT-Jan2021.pdf>

As a pet parent, I have been cautious about plants that can be toxic and have declined many poinsettia plants during the Christmas holidays. For more information about common holiday plants that are toxic to pets, go to <https://aercmn.com/5-common-holiday-plants-that-are-toxic-to-pets/> I guess I paid more attention to safeguarding my pets than myself!

The Socrates Project focuses on plants toxic to humans. While I was familiar with several, I did have some "uh-oh" moments as I went page by page.

Was I absent the day rhododendron and azalea were labeled with a skull and crossbones? How many miles have I hiked brushing against Virginia creeper? And how often have I paused to breathe in the scent of lily-of-the-valley? Fortunately, I have not snacked on any of them!

On a serious note, the authors cite the relationship between an increased interest in foraging for wild foods and an increase in accidental poisonings. In an article in the Virginia Mercury (May 3, 2021), Chris Holstege, medical director of the Blue Ridge Poison Center at UVA Health, said his colleagues have been alarmed by a sharp increase in Virginians consuming false hellebore, a highly toxic native species with leaves that — to the uninitiated — resemble the tops of wild leeks.

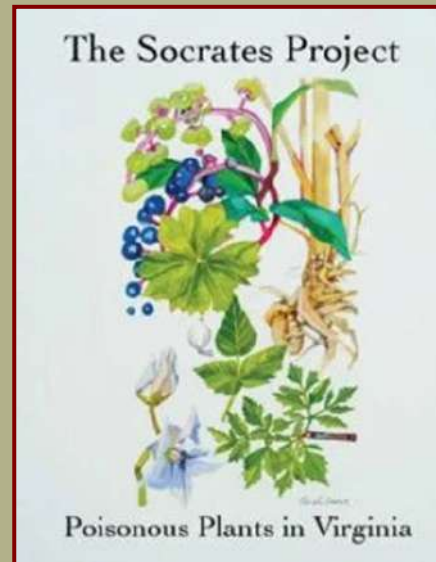


Photo: Rona Vrooman

Recently, when I was walking down to my mailbox, I spotted a plant that looked like a cherry tomato growing next to my driveway. It was Carolina horsenettle (*Solanum carolinense*), a species of nightshade that is also poisonous.

The publication notes that, because a plant is poisonous, it does not mean that it should be destroyed. They have an ecological value and are utilized by birds, mammals, and insects.

For me, the publication highlights the importance of both being cautious and expanding my plant knowledge.



For the Love of Plant Clinics

by Mel Flaherty

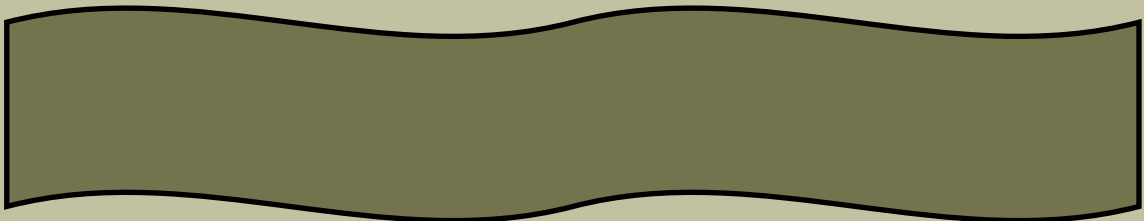
Plant Clinics provide rewarding opportunities for each of us Master Gardeners to, as Lynn Brammer says, "Spread the gardening bug!" My recent experience at a Plant Clinic at the NRV Fair illustrates the value of Plant Clinics as a community outreach program.

At our Fair Plant Clinic booth, I noticed a young man, about 8 years old, studying the seeds so I went over and asked if I could help. He said his mom liked to plant flowers and he was looking for some flower seeds for her! He'd picked out some hollyhock seeds. We talked about those for a bit, how they wouldn't bloom this year, how to save the seeds to plant in the Spring, and I helped him pick out another pack of flower seeds. He went over to his mom who was working at a nearby booth, and I heard him tell her what I'd just told him. I was impressed by his interest! I went over and talked to his mom a bit about her gardening adventures.

Then, I suggested he might want to go over and pick a plant to plant at our booth and then take home -- he did! He went over and Master Gardener Rachel Wilson helped him pick out a plant. She gave him a pot and showed him how to plant his plant. When he came back, I asked which plant he'd chosen, he indicated it was a secret because it was for his mother. Then he went over to our plant table and pointed at a succulent he'd chosen. Telling him he'd made an excellent choice and she (his mother) would love it, I told him a bit about the nature and care of a succulent, and he listened with keen interest.

I went home feeling very good about having encouraged a young potential gardener! Like "Dr Dirt " in the book *Maverick Gardeners* by Rusher Feilding, we as Master Gardeners share plants, our knowledge, and our love of plants. It's so rewarding!

If you've never done plant clinic, I encourage you to give it a try. So many people are interested in plants and gardening, and like us, just love to talk about it. It will make your day!



Deck the Halls With (You Guessed It) Pods of Okra

by Ashley Johnson

Since 2023 was proclaimed year of the okra (by yours truly), I couldn't miss incorporating okra into my holiday decorations.

- I had several dried okra pods I grew a few years ago that hadn't been used yet. I gently split them open to remove the seeds and spread out the pod sections a bit without breaking it completely apart.
- Next, I trimmed the stem back to about an inch, inserted a wooden chopstick into the stem with a blob of hot glue and waited about 60 seconds for it to set up.
- Then, I spray painted the pods a shade by Rust-Oleum called "Champagne Mist." I wanted them to still have a natural look but with a bit of sparkle, I also already had this color in my stash. (I love spray paint - so many possibilities and it's so fast).
- Once the spray paint dried, these newly created okra floral picks could be used in a seasonal wreath, tucked into your Christmas tree, or even in a centerpiece. I used mine to add a natural element to the garland around our doorways.

It'll be fun this holiday season to see if anyone notices the okra additions to my decor. 2023 may be coming to an end but I sure hope I've inspired you to grow and use okra for many years to come, even as you're decking the halls.





Photos: Ashley Johnson



MASTER GARDENER PHOTOS
by Emma Patterson



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Comments, questions, and submissions can be sent to Susan Perry

A special thanks to everyone who contributed to this issue of the newsletter!
I can't do it without you.