

The Grapevine

September 2023

New River Valley Master Gardener Association Newsletter

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From the MG Coordinator

by Wendy Silverman

It is fair season! We recently finished the NRV Fair, with some intense competition. Some Master Gardeners (MGs) were judges in several categories, and we hosted a plant clinic all week. We then moved to the Newport Fair, where a few MGs had entries, other MGs judged, and we hosted a plant clinic.

On September 9th, we will have our last county fair, the Floyd Livestock and County Fair. There too, several MGs will be judges, others may be submitting, and we'll have one more plant clinic.

We have not had a fair judging school for about 2 years. I think we should hold our own fair judging workshop in late fall or early winter. Having it in the growing season is best for good veggie and garden samples, but it doesn't fit it in the schedule. We can focus it on veggie crops, canned goods, and horticulture (cut flowers and potted plants). This year, there was a need for judges in farm crops (hay, corn, and other agronomic crops) at the NRV Fair, and last year at the Newport Fair, so we need to add that. I think we should invite our neighboring units to join us. I see it being at least a half-day event, especially if we are covering 4 different topics.

Is this something you would be interested in attending? If so, please send me a quick email. Also, if you would like to help organize the fair judging workshop, please let me know!



Wendy Silverman

Who Doesn't Love Ribbons?

New River Valley Fair Adds a New Category for Exhibitors: Special Friends of the NRV

by Sarah Smiley

You may have heard of the friendly fair competition amongst the NRVMGs (including Wendy Silverman) to see who can enter and win the most ribbon money at the New River Valley Fair. If you haven't entered anything into the Fair, consider doing it next year for your project, especially if you are doing something for special needs folks in the community.

This year, a new category was created: Special Friends of the New River Valley Fair. This was a dedicated area to give special recognition to members of the community who may be residing in nursing homes, care facilities, group homes, or participate in day activities. These entries were judged, and awarded ribbons and premiums (monetary awards). The inspiration for this new category was discussions between the Fair representative (Myra McKay) and NRVMGs. Everyone agreed that we want to provide a more representative competitive base for these exhibitors. Myra would like to grow this category next year and include more special friends. This year, the exhibitors were: AREN Nursing Homes, Fairview Home Adult Living Facility, Fairview Home Garden Club, Pulaski Adult Day Care, and Pulaski Community Youth Center.



Fairview Home Garden Club submitted 6 horticulture entries. All won blue ribbons, so \$36 in ribbon money was earned and will be used towards their end-of-year gardening party.

Fairview Home Adult Living Facility was greatly inspired by the Fair Book of Categories and submitted many entries. Their submission of the Potato Dance Party won a bevy of ribbons, including a Best in Show ribbon.

All total, ribbon earnings for the Fairview Adult Home were \$159! This doesn't include the \$36 earned by the Fairview Home Garden Club. As you can imagine, they were thrilled and our party is going to be bigger and better this year! Think about supporting your local fairs by submitting entries next year – who doesn't love ribbons?

The sign accompanying the entry reads:

Potato Dance Party

*We do the Watusi,
We do the Twist,
But the Mashed Potato
is not on our dance list!*

*One Potato, Two Potato,
Three Potato, Four –
Ten happy potatoes on the dance floor!*

*Spending time together
is how we stay
happy and healthy every day.*



Photos: Sarah Smiley

Summer Highlights

(more summer photos to be found throughout)



Sue Perry: Shaded streets. Cartagena, Columbia.



Olin & Ruth Ann Whitener



Rona Vrooman: Montgomery Museum Garden -- Heritage Day.



Gwen Ewing: Amaryllis from NRVMG. Five blooms coming on, blooming July 25th. Picture taken August 1st.

Icelandic Rambles

by Erica Jones

I went to Iceland from late May to early June. This is not prime garden flower/wildflower season – is a bit early. Iceland is an island with a small population that is located almost entirely on the coast. It is also volcanic and a fairly young island; so the 'soil' is totally different from what we have in Virginia. If you saw what was underfoot, you would not call it 'soil.' Volcanic discharge will deteriorate into smaller and smaller pieces, which is how all soils are formed.



Mud pots: a steamy, desolate area.
Photos: Erica Jones

The growing conditions reminded me of a wet Utah – lots of sand, rocks, and few trees. There are trees in protected spots but they are hard to find. Iceland was, at one point, forested, but most of the trees were cut down for lumber. There have been recent reforestation efforts in some areas. Many trees are just three feet tall, trying to live between boulders. Between the soil, the short growing season, and the cold, there are many challenges. You see a lot of evergreen trees but none of them are native. Birch and larch are the most common native trees.



This waterfall had seven different, named falls.

Iceland is sitting smack dab on two continental plates – the Eurasian plate and the North American plate. Because of this, the country is blessed with above ground rifts (geologic formation between two plates), active volcanos, and lots of geothermal energy. The many spectacular waterfalls give new meaning to the phrase 'a dime-a-dozen'.

Iceland has its own version of 'invasive' – a very pretty one; but as all properly-defined invasives, they are not native and are overrunning the native plants. One plant considered invasive is cow parsley. Another is Alaska lupine -- who would have thought? But it is spreading rapidly, after first arriving in 1945. The lupine was revving-up for its bloom period when I was there. Between you, me, and the fencepost, maybe having blue lupine cover the land might be better than the alternative of nothing growing, which means more erosion. Iceland has a major erosion problem, given the type of soil and a lack of anything growing on much of the ground. This is discussed in an interesting article: <https://hakaimagazine.com/features/why-iceland-is-turning-purple/>.



... And these are TALL trees!

I saw two gardens on the trip. One was behind a small house and was heavily protected by rock walls. The house was originally owned by the "Rock Lady" and is now run by her children. There were indoor and outdoor rock collections, sculptures of rocks and found materials, and a spring garden that caught my eye.



Botanical Garden water sculpture.

I also visited the Grasagarður Botanical Garden in Reykjavik. While tiny, it was extremely well maintained and had a very welcoming greenhouse/café with chairs. Sculpture again! Very early spring flowers again! Waterfalls/water features again!

Truthfully, I was amazed at what you can grow so close to the Arctic Circle. The growing zone on the southern end of the island is 7b, but you can find zone 3 in the center. While Iceland's latitude is between 63 and 68°, most of the inhabited cities are Zone 6, 7, or 8! The annual rainfall about 40". It does not get terribly cold, but man, do the days get SHORT.

Speaking of volcanoes, the natives seemed to think they were a bit behind on eruptions, which can happen anytime. No thanks!!! One of the harbors we were in had been seriously reduced with volcanic flow but was still usable by smaller tourist ships. And since the time I first wrote this, they had a volcanic eruption. I assume they all feel better now. This eruption was more of a lava ooze coming out of long horizontal weak spots and not your traditional cone-shape, belching volcano. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoTThzReYb8>

Hoary Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum incanum*) by Ellen Burch

If you are looking for a plant that will attract pollinators and beneficial insects to your garden, this mint is a superstar. Like all mints, it will spread. I bought a small pot at Spikenard Farm, the bee sanctuary near Floyd, a few years ago. I've allowed it to spread along a fence line near my garden. It's amazing to watch wasps, native bees, honeybees, dozens of tiny Tachinid flies, and other insects working this plant. I believe I have fewer garden pests because of all these good guys.



Photos: Ellen Burch

Hoary mountain mint has medicinal properties and can be used to make tea. When crushed, the leaves have a strong and very pleasant fragrance. It grows to a height of around 3 feet, likes sun, and requires little maintenance. The deer and rabbits in my yard haven't touched it. Bloom time is from July through August. There are a number of species of mountain mint but I believe this one is an exceptional pollinator plant.



Lazy Gardeners and Compost Theories by Kristi Williams

This is for my fellow lazy gardeners who despise getting out the pitchfork and turning their compost pile as much as I do. I have developed a theory to comfort my mind from my utter procrastination with regard to this chore. For a couple of years now, I add a shovel full (or two) of mature compost to my newly started compost piles. Why would I do such a silly thing? Well, we have all heard that "a little leaven leavens the whole lump" and attached to it a rather negative connotation. However, from this premise I dare suggest we can make the science behind it work for our good! By taking some of the precious goodness of the active microorganisms from a mature compost pile, we can effectively inoculate the immature piles to speed up the breaking down process. Just like a sourdough starter or fast-acting yeast will quickly leaven a whole lump of bread dough my hope is that passing along a sprinkle of goodness from one generation of compost to the next to the next might produce results that save me from having to turn the pitchfork!

Garden Blessings!

The Book Club
by Ashley Johnson

Our Master Gardener (MG) book club is having a great time reading gardening-related books, trying out new spots around the New River Valley, getting to know one another, and having fantastic discussions.

In June, several of us gathered at Eastern Divide Brewing Company in Blacksburg to discuss **Mr. Owita's Guide to Gardening** by Carol Wall. This is a heartwarming story of unexpected friendship. We also have a local MG connection to this one! Stan Stanley and his wife, Gaby, attended Radford High School with the author and her husband! Eastern Divide is a really nice spot with an impressive indoor plant collection.

In early August, we gathered at Long Way Brewing in Radford to discuss **Maverick Gardeners: Dr. Dirt and Other Determined Independent Gardeners** by Felder Rushing. Our group really enjoyed this one. This is not a "gardening how-to book" at all, but rather, highlights several determined independent gardeners (DIGers). In a world with so many rules and so much judgement, it was refreshing to simply be encouraged to garden as you see fit. We also were a fan of the pizza from the "Community Pizza" food truck!

Two excellent gardening reminders from the book:

- Keep experimenting: a good garden is never finished, always changing. Switch things up to experience the garden more vividly.
- Don't set out to control the garden totally. Relax, see what works for you and what needs help. Keep nudging it in the right direction.

Our next book selection is: **Soil: The Story of a Black Mother's Garden** by Camille T. Dungy.

Next gathering: end of September/beginning of October. Exact date and details will be shared in the weekly Master Gardener email.

This is an excellent way to earn some continuing education hours while also enjoying one another's company. It is really fascinating to see the different parts of the book that stand out to different folks. All are welcome to join us!



June Book Club



August Book Club.
Photos: Ashley Johnson

My Day at the Todd Family Railroad and Gardens by Laura Swift

Sustainable Blacksburg sponsored free garden tours from May – August on the 3rd Sunday of each month. All were open to the public, between 2 – 5pm. In May, there were two gardens; in June, three gardens were on the tour; in July, there were two gardens to visit; and in August, two gardens were toured. For details, you can check <https://sustainableblacksburgva.org/sustainable-sunday-garden-tours/>.



In June, I visited the Todd family garden, designed with their three children in mind. Mr. Todd is a model railroad enthusiast, which he has successfully incorporated into the garden.

One of the Todd's twin boys greeted me when I arrived. He poured me a tiny sip of lemonade in a paper cup -- he didn't want me to spill.

I was handed a wooden train car to take with me and put in specific places where music started and the train would run. Three trains ran around the tracks. There was a circus train with animals and a big circus tent made by an aunt. A train ran in a large mining area with very cool bridges, although it was not running that day. Finally, Thomas the train and friends were in the train yard.

The garden was incorporated very naturally, all around the train track. The trains were battery operated, so the kids could run them.



Photos: Laura Swift

I was also given a scavenger hunt list which included finding a cowboy taking a bath, a mountain climber, and a baseball game.

I loved the labels in the vegetable garden. The Todd's rain barrel was modelled after R2-D2, the robot from Star Wars. I sat by the koi pond and chatted with friends. It was a lovely afternoon. I had so much fun, I ran home, and brought my train-loving husband back with me!

Note From the President

Hello NRV Master Gardeners (MGs),

As usual, where did the summer go? It's a good time to reflect on a few highlights of our members' hard work since our June newsletter:

- a completely entertaining and informative General Education meeting, lead by Ed Blackford, on growing and appreciating gourds
- the annual NRV Garden Tour organized by our talented members, Lynn Bramer and Diane Blount, and supported by many of you, volunteering to assist before or day of the event – 7 gardens this year!
- NRVMG hosting therapy garden project tours for visiting MGs during the MG College and all of the NRVMGs who volunteer their time to help support MG College
- the MANY fairs and summer events that are kept on track by Wendy Silverman and supported by members
- the projects our members kept going during vacation time, when support may be thin

We'd love to hear more about how your project is going. Send us a few lines of write-up and photos that we can share on the NRVMG Facebook page. The more we share about what we are doing with the public and our communities, the more value our efforts will have not only in terms of helping Wendy report great statistics to encourage program funding but encouraging the public to engage more with our programs.

Our Master Gardening work is important, and so is time to speak and learn from each other in more relaxed social settings. For example, the NRVMG book club gatherings are growing and many thanks to Ashley Johnson for pulling this together and finding fun meeting spots. In August, Stan Stanley re-lit his pizza oven and re-started an always popular NRVMG pizza party at his lovely home (more on this later).

As a reminder, I appreciate hearing your ideas, comments, and questions. Your insights and participation are important for improving and strengthening this organization. Even though the NRVMGA Board meeting notes are circulated to members, the meetings are open to NRVMGA members, and you are warmly invited to attend. November will be our normally scheduled end-of-year meeting and pot luck dinner – be on the lookout for Wendy's emails.

I hope to see you there,

Sarah

The Year of the Okra. Now What???

by Ashley Johnson, Official NRV Okra Promoter

Thanks to all of you who accepted the okra challenge. Now you're probably thinking, "What can I do with this okra?" I'm so glad you asked!

Okra is excellent for crafts.

Step one: dry the okra pods

Let them grow on the plant until large and tough (or leave those pods that you missed picking during the edible, tender stage).

Pods can be left on the plant to dry. I've had success with this "hands off" method. But if you'd rather free up your space for fall gardening, entire okra plants can be cut and hung to dry. Another option is to remove the individual okra pods from the plant and then string them onto fishing line to dry. Either way, place them in a spot out of direct sun and with good air circulation. They should be dry in a few weeks.

Step two: create

A quick Pinterest search reveals so much okra creativity. With some hot glue and paint - the possibilities are endless.



Here is a personal fall favorite: two gorgeous fall wreaths. Do Dodson, the creator, graciously gave us permission to use her photos. For detailed instructions, visit <https://www.dododsondesigns.com/diy-fall-wreath-made-from-okra/>. More of Do's content can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/dododsondesigns>.



For more ideas, like a whimsical fall okra bunting that I love, just search Pinterest for 'okra bunting' or whatever idea you come up with. You'll find tons of inspiration.

Photos: Do Dodson Designs

Now, for those of you who are looking forward to eating the okra you grew, here are two easy, tried and true recipes.

Arlean's Delish Grilled Okra, courtesy of Brenda & Matt

Rub okra with oil, thread onto skewers, season with garlic powder and salt. Grill & serve.

Cousin Carol's Oven-Roasted Okra

1. Preheat oven to 450 degrees.
2. Trim off the stem and tip. Then cut in half, lengthwise, or slice into discs (your choice).
3. Place okra in large bowl. Toss to coat with 1/2 T olive oil and spices (2 t. fresh thyme, 1/4 t. garlic powder, 1/4 t. sea salt, grated parmesan cheese, and ground pepper. A pinch of cayenne pepper is optional.)
4. Place okra on a baking sheet in a single layer.
5. Roast for 20-25 minutes, until lightly browned and tender.
6. Serve hot.

Ashley Johnson: "I approve this message."

Try Something Different

by Erica Jones & Paige the Pound Hound

I have laying hens, along with flower and (sort of) vegetable gardens. For me, the veggies are an exercise in tomato-tomatillo-summer squash, with maybe some spring lettuce, if life permits. I am keeping three families 'in egg'; or I was, until the summer visitors arrived to regularly clean me out (that is black rat snakes, with names. Micro has problems getting an egg down, but Medium and X-Large are not having any problems). A varied diet for hens helps promote egg production.

I do NOT let my chickens out of their run to tear up the yard and get eaten, so I have to supply extra eats to them, especially things in green. When the grass gets tough and harder to hand harvest, I turn to garden culls (think lettuce gone to seed, Swiss chard gone to seed, too many zucchinis, and buggy, old, leafy kale). I had an empty spot in the late spring so I thought, 'Why not try some mustard greens?'

It seems mustard greens come in red, spicy, not so spicy, taller, shorter, curly, flat, you name it. All the online sources I read yap about "early spring crop" though, which I did not do since, in theory, I was growing them for the chickens. I am not sure where I got the seeds (locally) -- the seed package has vanished.

So far, I've been eating the leaves and the chickens have been deprived, but I suspect this will change. My planting is very sweet, with a delayed yet decided bite. Pretty amusing mixed in with boring old lettuce. I was so proud of the stuff that I entered a cup of it in the New River Fair! (This precipitated some trauma on entry -- so what class do we enter THIS in???) Maybe next year I will have more competition.

One year I tried arugula and the laying hens got that too. Arugula made another appearance for me this spring, courtesy of another gardener; and I still don't like the stuff. Arugula (*Eruca sativa*) is also in the mustard family but with a "distinctive pungent flavor" (according to U. of Wisconsin). It too is better in cooler weather, but again, the chickens don't mind the "undesirably strong" flavor which can develop during warm weather. It's also pretty easy to grow, although the baby plants looked more similar to the usual crop of weeds that I cultivate in my vegetable garden than the mustard did. According to U. of Illinois, arugula is "trending" -- uh huh. And no, my spouse does not like either the arugula or mustard. To each his own.

I have one more plant in the 'try something new' category. I had another bare spot show up a month ago, so I got out some very old crimson clover seed to try as a ground cover. This clover grows as an annual (but will re-seed), reaching 1 - 3 feet tall; and is rumored to make fabulous hay. The flowers on it are big enough and sturdy enough to use in flower arrangements - they are a nice shade of red, which is hard to find for cut flowers. We will see if I can get any flowers off of it. If you ever have seen a whole field of it growing, it is very impressive.



Mustard leaves. Photo: Erica Jones

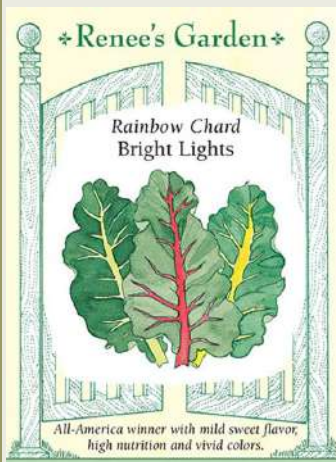
Celebrating Swiss Chard

by Rona Vrooman

Although it is not a recognized national holiday, on July 17, Master Gardeners Elizabeth Bryant, Kristi Williams, and Rona Vrooman celebrated Swiss Chard Appreciation Day at the Plenty! farm in Floyd, Virginia.

Festivities included nutritional information, recipes, food tastings, and plant giveaways.

Earlier in the season, as part of the Garden Rangers program, participants aged 7-12 learned how to plant seeds in trays and care for young plants. In the spirit of growing and sharing food with the community, the plants would then be distributed.



Swiss chard (*Beta vulgaris*) is a leafy green belonging to the Amaranthaceae/Chenopodioideae family, which also includes beet and spinach. (The family Amaranthaceae now includes the former Chenopodiaceae family). According to WebMD, "Swiss chard is a nutritional powerhouse -- an excellent source of vitamins K, A, and C, as well as a good source of magnesium, potassium, iron, and dietary fiber." We chose Bright Lights because of the beautiful rainbow of colors and a milder taste.

If you haven't tried cooking Swiss chard, you can eat both the leaves and stems. You can pick the young leaves, which are more tender, or wait until the leaves are larger and more mature for a stronger flavor. The leaves taste somewhere between spinach and kale and can be eaten raw, boiled, or sauteed. When cooked, the leaves lose their bitterness. While

the stems can be eaten raw, they are fibrous. Try roasting or sauteing with oil. Or, pickle them!

If you haven't tried growing Swiss chard yet, it is both cold hardy and heat tolerant. According to the University of Wisconsin-Madison website, "Chard prefers cool temperatures as high temperatures slow down leaf production but it tolerates heat better than spinach does and rarely bolts like spinach will."

In addition to a food crop, chard is also a decorative plant that can be used as an ornamental in the flower garden.

Swiss Chard Appreciation Day at Plenty! was a success, with about 30 people sampling a simple recipe and about two dozen plants finding new homes.

Garlicy Swiss Chard Recipe

1 bunch of Swiss chard, approx. 10 stems
1 tbsp olive oil
3 cloves garlic, minced
1/4 cup water
sea salt, to taste

- ◆ Wash and clean the chard.
- ◆ Remove leaves from stems.
- ◆ Cut stems into small pieces about 1/2 inch long.
- ◆ Roll leaves into a cigar-like shape and slice across horizontally into one-inch-wide strips.
- ◆ Heat olive oil in a sauté pan on medium heat. Add minced garlic and sauté for 1 minute.
- ◆ Add water and chard stems. Cook for 1-2 minutes, until softened.
- ◆ Add chard leaves and cook for an additional 4-5 minutes. The chard leaves will wilt down.
- ◆ Before serving, sprinkle with sea salt.



Photo: Rona Vrooman

Impressions from the NRV Garden Tour 2023

by Laura Swift

I visited every garden on the NRV tour. It was a fun and surprising day. Try to attend at least once! I plan to go back for more next year and next year.....

My body felt like it had been to the spa, then an art museum, and then a live concert! I was refreshed, relaxed, and not in a hurry. My senses were heightened. It was magical. I chatted with friends, both old and new.

I heard the beautiful, live music of violins and other stringed instruments, a harpist, and a piano. *Plein air* artists were painting what they could see around them and I sat in comfortable spaces and watched them.

The brochure of destinations was like a scavenger hunt and it was thrilling to find each garden.

ETZLER GARDEN at 305 Giles Rd: Vegetable garden intertwined with flowers. There were many cozy seating areas. Live piano music could be heard pouring out the front door and windows.



MATTINGLY GARDEN at 2107 Glade Rd: I loved seeing my friend Matt Gentry painting the farmhouse.

WILDER GARDEN at 3009 Wakefield Dr: I loved the use of ornamental vases in this garden and the lovely solo harpist, Renee Rippe.



MARQUIS GARDEN at 2904 Wakefield Dr: Lovely backyard shade garden with a water feature and a huge bullfrog. Elephant leaf hostas enveloped a tree trunk.



MILLER GARDEN at 3007 Wakefield Dr: A beautifully manicured lawn on all sides of the house with a lovely backyard pond.



STEWART GARDEN at 413 Giles Rd: The bathtubs were originally inside the old farmhouse. He uses them year-round. If you're wondering...yes, he does wear a bathing suit!

KECIORIUS & VILLAREAL GARDEN at 306 Greendale Dr: There was an inviting circle of Adirondack chairs around a brass fire pit. The family painted their rain barrel and placed an upside-down umbrella on top. There was a leafless tree of homemade bird houses, a beautiful maze garden with a stone walking path. I was drawn to the kid-friendly playground areas where children were involved in gardening.



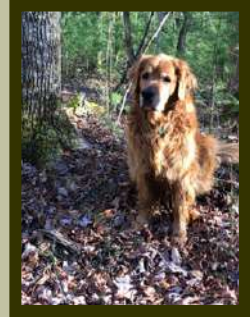
Photos: Laura Swift



Lyle & Summer: Two of the Best Dogs EVER!

by Carol Trutt

In 2009, Nina Templeton adopted a 12-month-old puppy who she named Lyle. Little did anyone know what a special pup Lyle was going to be for his 13 years. Lyle became a therapy dog. Wherever Nina went, you would find Lyle. As a matter of fact, sometimes it seemed children and adults were happier to see Lyle than Nina.



Then in 2018, Nina started a program at Falling Branch Elementary School called Gardening with Lyle. On Mondays and Fridays, they got students involved in all kinds of gardening. Lyle would roam the halls, go into classrooms, and visit the library. The children would hug and love on Lyle and he loved them right back. He was a big presence at Falling Branch.

During Covid, while Nina was administering vaccines, Lyle was with her. He put everyone at ease while getting the vaccines. After all, he is a therapy dog!

Lyle would show up at different NRV MGA events. He attended pot luck dinners, the plant sale, and Wonder Universe in the NRV Uptown Mall.

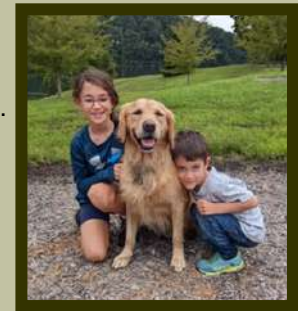


As time went on, Lyle started to slow down until finally he passed on July 21, 2022. The students and staff at Falling Branch created all sorts of memorial areas in the school library. One was a wonderful plaque with his paw print. (Nina was able to get a paw print stamp made from his paw.)

How was Nina going to get another therapy dog to fill Lyle's huge paw print? About two weeks after she lost Lyle, Nina went back to the same place she found Lyle and met a sweet 6.5-year-old Golden Retriever. Nina decided to name this little girl Summer, after Falling Branch school librarian, Summer Cox-Chong. Summer, the librarian, was honored to have the new therapy dog named after her.

Every Monday and Friday, Summer greets all the children and adults with tail wags and hugs. She knows her way around the school -- Nina just follows behind.

I had the pleasure of seeing Summer in action during spring 2023. Nina and Summer showed me around the school: the library where Lyle is forever remembered, the gardens in the courtyard where the children learn how to grow vegetables and herbs, and the playground. Summer even likes to go down the slide with the children. What an amazing girl!



Now wherever Nina goes, Summer tags along! Just like Lyle, she goes to Wonder Universe and she attends most NVRMGA events. She loves belly rubs too!

Nina never thought she'd have another therapy dog as wonderful as Lyle, but Summer just fell right into place. Who would have thought Nina would be blessed by having another perfect therapy dog, but she does with Summer!

Photos: Carol Trutt & Nina Templeton

NRV Master Gardener Expertise & Interest Survey

by Ashley Johnson

We all became Master Gardeners (MGs) because of a shared love of gardening. As great as the actual plants are, my absolute favorite part of being a MG is our PEOPLE! We have a really great group with a wide variety of interests and abilities.

We have created a very quick, simple survey to gather this info in one spot. This survey should take less than five minutes to complete.

What is it and why?

The purpose of this brief survey is to collect information from NRVMGs on your current hobbies and interests pertaining to everything gardening. This information will help us in a few ways:

- ⇒ Give you opportunity to connect with other NRVMGs over shared interests.
- ⇒ Create educational programs that better support your interests.
- ⇒ Possibly involve you in a workshop (if you are comfortable) to teach others, or if we are contacted by a client with a particular question that fits your expertise, we may ask that you respond to them.

This data will be compiled and shared **only** with our current NRV MGs, our MG Coordinator, and our Help Desk volunteers.

LINK TO SURVEY: <https://forms.gle/eUkV93XMPLQUkRSS9>

More Summer Highlights



Sue Perry: Plaza de Botero. Medellín, Columbia



Gwen Ewing: Crocosmia 'Lucifer' blooming at the end of July into August.

Fairview Home Doings

by Sarah Smiley

Just to share, on Friday, I stopped by my therapy garden project at Fairview Home. To be honest, it was hot and I was a bit tired (thanks, ragweed allergies) and was planning on a quick in and out.

I was quickly surrounded by a few of the residents who were THRILLED with their find that morning of a baby bunny when they went to water the tomatoes. My first thought was, "Where there's one bunny, there are 20" - so I wasn't especially thrilled with the bunny find.

The residents insisted I take photos of themselves with "Thumper" -- yes, they named it. They were thrilled that the garden was, quote, "so wonderful that the bunnies want to live there."

Instead of a quick in and out, their being thrilled with the joy of finding a potentially destructive, yet adorably friendly bunny, led us into a 2-hour gardening session on bunny food likes, dislikes, habitat, and enthusiasm for weeding.

They asked that I share these photos with the other Master Gardeners and hope that you, too, find unexpected joy in your garden project. (I just hope it isn't rabbits.)



Thumper. Photos: Sarah Smiley



Side note: Fairview did contact Animal Control and they were scheduled to come take a look at Thumper later that day.



MGs Take a Ton of Pix!!!
Photos: Ruth Ann & Olin Whitener



Butterflies and Pollination and More

by Erica Jones

I got into a snafu/discussion about the term 'pollinator garden' this spring and I suspect a lot of people are laboring under some misconceptions. I am not going to try to define that term here but instead, will diverge into butterflies.

Butterflies want to eat nectar, fruit, and over-ripe fruit. They have a very short lifespan and are here to produce eggs. They actually do some pollination, but pollen does not stick to their legs like bees and other insects so they don't move much pollen around. A useful link is: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/wildflowers/pollinators/animals/butterflies.shtml>. In my opinion, butterflies are best considered ornaments.

BUT some current research is looking into the possibility of butterflies helping pollinate cotton and other blossoms that bees/flies/better pollinators tend to ignore (<https://www.science.org/content/article/butterflies-provide-extraordinary-help-pollinating-cotton-fields>). And it has been shown that butterflies visit cotton blossoms at different times than do bees and other insects. Cotton is picky about when it will be receptive to incoming pollen, and the blossoms only last one day. So, if you want to take a stab at growing your own cotton, this is one place where butterflies do pollination.

It never hurts to feed those butterfly larvae! NC State has a website with a list of plant hosts for butterfly larvae at <https://henderson.ces.ncsu.edu/2021/05/plants-that-host-butterfly-larvae/>. You probably have a lot of these plants your yard -- well I certainly have some. For instance, painted ladies' larvae like thistles (some are invasive non-natives), mallows, hollyhocks, asters, legumes, and many others. A few other plants mentioned are willows, sedges, bullrush, orchard grass, aspens, and hawthorns. So basically, if you have a specific butterfly in mind, read up. Otherwise, just plant a variety of stuff. And of course, my buddy the pawpaw tree is host to caterpillars of zebra swallowtails.

You can design a garden to provide a steady source of pollen (for bees, flies, wasps, etc.) if you have plants that bloom in different seasons, or all summer long, like zinnia. See <https://extension.umn.edu/flowers/zinnia>. I once toured a NC professor's garden who must have gotten too many questions about pollen producing plants because he got a little annoyed and answered, 'PLANT ZINNEAS!' I think he has a point! Zinnias are easy to grow and look great in a mass. And butterflies like their bright colors.

On a different note, I have a new favorite tool this month. I bought this beast this spring, although I'm not sure where. At first glance, it does not look like it would be particularly useful, but this is one of those tools that is good at multiple tasks but not outstanding at any one of them, although the pointed blades are great for making quick holes in the dirt! It is surprisingly good at clipping smaller clumps of grass, but also handles pruning smaller stuff. If you garden at away places you might consider getting one of these to keep in your car. It is much smaller than most grass clippers and pruners so the portability of fitting it in a back pocket of is nice.



Photo: Erica Jones

Dirt Therapy: Gardening to Process Grief

by Shelia Herrera and Laura Swift

My Master Gardener Intern friend, Sheila, lost her mom recently. Out of town family and friends would be arriving soon. I remembered how much Lela, her mom, loved sitting outside on the front porch. During the many years of our friendship, I would drive over and see her waving hello and inviting me to come and sit. My mind was flooded with memories of her. I had spent a lot of time with her during the last few years of her life and I had the idea to freshen up the front porch with flowers. It would give Sheila and me some quiet time together to get our hands dirty.



While her siblings were on site during their mother's cremation, Sheila wanted to do something a little different. I shared my idea and we both felt like this would be the perfect time for 'dirt therapy' as a way to process grief.

We purchased bags of soil and brightly colored plants, using every pot we could find. Working under the shade of the porch, cleaning and filling the pots with fresh dirt, we watched the sitting area come to life with colors and smells. It was a cool afternoon with a slight breeze and the neighborhood was quiet. It was the perfect situation for reflection.

We had both taken the Master Gardening classes and were very eager to complete this project. Shelia wore her Master Gardener aprons and gloves and we played in the dirt. We took selfies. There was laughter, a few tears, and lots of loving memories of Lela were shared.

Gardening can be very helpful when working through our emotions. Emotions can be felt as energy in our body. Motion/moving our body helps the emotions move through and be released. Dirt therapy helped both of us begin the process of grieving.

It seemed like time briefly stood still for us. I felt like I was helping my friend grieve the loss of her mother in a fun, lasting way by creating core memories. The activity of gardening was helping process the emotions of loss. She was feeling all these emotions in her body and the activity of working with her hands allowed these emotions to move through her body so she could begin to process her grief.

Here is Sheila's experience of 'dirt therapy' written by her yesterday sitting in my kitchen while I baked cookies.



My mother passed away. It seemed surreal. I was prepared for this but yet, I didn't feel prepared. On Saturday, the cremation was taking place and I really did not want to go. My aunt and brother went. Laura called and said we needed 'dirt therapy.' I loved the sound of that! My mother loved flowers and she loved sitting on the front porch. We went to the Ace Hardware and bought flowers, a fern, and dirt.

When we got home, we set up a place to easily work with the dirt. The trash can served as a work table and the mop bucket was filled with dirt for easy scooping. The planting and some repotting began. We were excited to discuss the roots of the fern and all we had learned in our Master Gardener class. I had my apron on and I was excited that I had made it through and finished the class!

It was breezy and quiet. No one was home. We laughed and talked about the different kinds of flowers we had gotten. We took turns filling the pots with soil and compost. This activity of mixing the soil and putting flowers in each pot was relaxing and meditative and began restoring my weary body after caring for my mom. It felt like I was creating a beautiful space for my mom. When all the flowers were planted and all the pots were full, we swept up any spilled dirt and started staging the front porch. Each plant was in a color coordinated pot and placed in the best location to be seen. We tried to remember to keep shade plants in the shade. We used plant stands and an old wicker-bottomed chair to create the "right look" to show off each plant. You know what I mean. It was pleasing to the eye, balanced, with floral beauty placed in just the right way as you come up the front steps. The final product was amazing. It filled me with joy to see the arrangement of flowers on our porch. We took pictures to document our adventure.

Now this front, outdoor space is a place to sit and enjoy the afternoon. It is a space to remember my mom. Who knew a little dirt and flowers would bring me so much joy and also be a memorial to honor my mom!



Photos: Shelia Herrera & Laura Swift

Stan and Gaby Stanley -- There's No Party Like a Stanley Pizza Party

by Sarah Smiley

If you haven't been to the beautiful home and gardens of Master Gardener (MG) Stan Stanley and his wife, Gaby, it is a treat. As is the delicious wood-fired pizza Stan prepares in the brick oven that he built himself. He began the NRVMG pizza party years ago and this welcome annual tradition was halted during COVID. This year, rain did not prevent the party kicking back into gear. Stan is a man of many skills, and hanging strategically placed tarps is evidently one of them. Did we walk around his gardens despite the rain? Of course, we did – that is just who we are!

Stan's quest to build his pizza oven is a tale he should share as part of an educational meeting. He was inspired by his lovely wife, Gaby, her Italian heritage, and their trips to Italy. Gaby told us that it takes 18 hours for the homemade pizza dough to rise and be ready for the pizza making. They had prepared enough dough for 20 pizzas and Stan made 16. Would we have eaten more? Yes. Yes we would! It is just that good.

A few of us sat outside, under the tarps, to chat, keep Stan company, and enjoy the delicious smell of wood-fired pizza. People contributed their favorite beverages for others to try, as well as a wide selection of side dishes and desserts to share.

The rain moved the party into the Stanleys' basement - they said they can host up to 80 people (note to self for next NRVMG party room need).

Many thanks to Stan and Gaby for continuing this tradition and for all the work that went into hosting 27 of us. A lot of stories and laughter were shared, and it was a wonderful, enjoyable evening for everyone.



Stan making the pizza.



Stan & the wood-fired oven.



Stan -- lookin' good!

Photos: Sarah Smiley



Photo: Gwen Ewing
Red, night-blooming cereus. Member of the cactus family but free of spines & spikes. Thick, broad leaves. It has been outside for 5 months. Cereus bloom at night & often the bloom fades the next day but this one has stayed in bloom for several days and has several blooms.



Photo: Gwen Ewing



Photo: Ruth Ann & Olin Whitener

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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!