

# THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

March 2025



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**Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardener community newsletter.**

Each month we bring you relevant seasonal scientific-based horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on. Subscription information is on the last page of this newsletter or on the RAMGA website, [www.ramga.org](http://www.ramga.org).

Virginia Master Gardeners are Virginia Cooperative Extension volunteers, extending horticultural and environmental outreach across the commonwealth. Volunteers receive fifty hours of training and are required to do, at the minimum, 20 hours of volunteering per year and 8 hours of Continuing Education to maintain their MG status.

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## **Save the Date! NATIVE TREE AND SHRUB GIVEAWAY**

**Saturday, April 26<sup>th</sup>, noon-1:30**, RARA Community Room, 350 Spotswood Dr., Lexington, sponsored by the Upper James River Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society and the Rockbridge Master Gardeners.

Trees and shrubs include Sweetbay Magnolia, Redbud, Silky & White Dogwoods, Black Chokeberry, Hazelnut, Swamp White Oak & Paw Paw. Route 11 Nursery and the Master Gardeners will be selling native plants.

## COMMUNITY HAPPENINGS

**Friday, March 14, 8:00am – 4:15pm, Shenandoah Plant Symposium, Wayne Theatre, Waynesboro.**

Register here: <https://secure.rec1.com/VA/waynesboro-va/catalog> You need to click under SPECIAL EVENTS, the Shenandoah Plant Symposium to get to the registration link.

- Dale Hendricks: “The Big Picture: Regenerating Life, Landscapes, Climate and Living Soils”
- Laura Viancour: “Early Plant Explorers and Garden Influencers”
- Bryce Lane: “Mixing It Up: Inspiring Perennials and Woody Plant Combinations” and “The Power of Plants”
- Nancy Adamson: “Specialist Bees”

**Saturday, March 15, 9:00am – 2:00pm, Bethlehem United Methodist Church, Moneta, Va.**

**“Critter Control: Protect your plants from unwanted Guests”** presented by the Bedford Master Gardeners. For more information and to register:

<https://www.bedfordareamastergardeners.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GTGL25-Digital-Brochure-Final.pdf>

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## MARCH GARDEN TIPS

Margaret Roach’s advice in her popular blog, “A Way to Garden” (and catch her weekly column in the *New York Times*) for the month of March is to “make like a daffodil”. In other words, poke your head up, look around and see what needs to be done and be quick to assess the weather. March can be so variable.

**Please note: Our USDA Plant Hardiness zone designation has changed in the last year or so. Zonage is determined by the average annual extreme minimum winter temperature in which perennial plants are likely to survive. We used to be 6b but are now 7a (0 to 5 degrees Fahrenheit).**

- Start your garden clean-up, but it is wise to take it slowly, as our last frost date hovers around May 7<sup>th</sup>. Remove twigs and other debris. Pull weeds, especially those winter annuals such as chickweed and hairy bittercress before they bloom and set seed in the spring. Cut back dead stems.
- Cut back dead hellebore foliage to give the new growth and those beautiful flowers a chance to shine.
- Cut back your ornamental grasses to 4-6”.
- Liriope needs to be cut back about now. A mower works best.

- Clean out your bird boxes. Nesting birds don't care for a dirty house.
- Now is the time to start seeds indoors.
- Direct sow cool-season vegetables such as peas, carrots, leeks spinach, arugula mid-March
- Corn gluten meal is a natural pre-emergent weed and feed for lawns. It needs to be applied before the temperature reaches 55 degrees at 4" deep. This is usually when the redbuds bloom.
- March is a great time to plant trees and shrubs.
- There is still time to prune summer blooming shrubs such as beautyberry, clethra, oakleaf hydrangea.
- A rule of thumb is to prune your roses when the forsythia blooms.
- Get out the deer repellent. Hungry pregnant does will ravage new plant growth. Deer will get used to any repellent, so switch off repellents throughout the season.
- Top dress your vegetable beds with compost.
- Sow grass seed in your lawn's bare spots and keep it moist until it sprouts.
- Late March is a good time to divide daylilies and Shasta daisies.
- Now is a good time to have your soil tested.

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## Backyard Peach Trees

*By Dave Bryer- RAMGA Fruit Tree & Berry Project*

### Primer for growing your own backyard peach trees:

Peach varieties recommended for Rockbridge County VA include July Prince, Contender, Big Red, Sure Crop, & Sure Prince, all of which are (cold weather rootstock) late bloomers to minimize frost damage. Also look for variety disease resistance. Plant minimum 20 ft spacing.



**Soil Requirements:** pH 5.8-6.5 Well-drained sandy loamy soil.

**Fertilization:** Perform soil test. Can use NPK 10-10-10 or slow release. Young trees need phosphorus for root development and nitrogen for fruit development. Split fertilization application March and May. (use ~ 2 lbs. of slow release).

**Pruning:** Done during dormant season using bypass loppers. Train to an open center. Establishment pruning done to shape a young tree- select 3-4 well-spaced, permanent scaffold limbs. Prune root sucker buds, cross branches, sickly or diseased branches, and straight up growth shoots to maintain easy access for harvesting.

**Disease Prevention:** Do winter pruning only and apply dormant oil such as NEEM oil in winter and after pruning. Refer to the State EMG Home Garden Pest Mngmt Guide if you choose to spray pesticides such as pyrethrins. Frost protection can be aided by using a sheet or throw cloth on smaller trees.

**Synopsis:** Eat a peach and watch them grow!

**Referring Resources:** (1) VCE Pub 426-841- (Tree Fruit in the Home Garden). (2) Growing Peaches at Home- Andy Rollins- Clemson Ext Agent:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXgQ\\_Ogf3dQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXgQ_Ogf3dQ)

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**February 24-28 was Invasive Species Awareness Week here in Virginia.** “An invasive species is any plant or animal that has been spread or been introduced into a new area where they are, or could, cause harm to the environment, economy, or human, animal, or plant health.” U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

March is a good time to start working on removing these invasive species. Blue Ridge Prism will be hosting a free webinar on March 26<sup>th</sup> on identifying 13 new invasive species on the Virginia Invasive Species List. [Register here](#). These include the following:

1. Chinese tallow-tree (*Triadica sebifera*)
2. Floating primrose-willow (*Ludwigia peploides* var. *glabrescens*)
3. Italian arum (*Arum italicum*)
4. Ravenna-grass (*Tripsidium ravennae*)
5. Trifoliate orange (*Citrus trifoliata*)
6. Two-horned trapa (*Trapa bispinosa* var. *innumai*)
7. Curled pondweed (*Potamogeton crispus*)
8. Fountain grass (*Cenchrus purpurascens*)
9. Incised fumewort (*Corydalis incisa*)
10. Leatherleaf mahonia (*Mahonia bealei*)
11. Sweet autumn clematis (*Clematis terniflora*)
12. Nandina aka Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*)
13. Butterfly Bush aka orange-eye butterfly-bush (*Buddleja davidii*)

**Louis Brennan has contributed the following articles, one on Leatherleaf Mahonia and the other on Nandina, two of the species on the list. See her article on Arum in last month's newsletter.**

## Look-alikes: Oregon Grape Holly and Leatherleaf Mahonia

By Louise Brennan

*Mahonia aquifolium* (commonly known as Oregon Grape Holly), is a native (and the state flower of Oregon); *Berberis bealei*, also known as leatherleaf mahonia or as Beale's barberry is an invasive, imported from China in the 19th century. Both are described as multi-stemmed, evergreen shrubs with upright stems. Both have showy yellow blooms in late winter and blue berries in late summer. Both are drought-resistant and prefer shade to full sun. Both appear in nurseries and garden centers. So, which is the plant growing right across your fence line in your neighbor's garden?

I was pondering this question as I watched the birds feast on the blue berries in my neighbor's yard last summer. Birds love these berries and "plant" the seeds liberally in my yard. But how to tell if I was looking at a friend or an enemy?

The easiest answer seems to lie in the leaves. According to Brian Daggs of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, "These two species can be distinguished by the veins on the leaflets. Leatherleaf mahonia has three or more distinct veins that start from the base of the leaflet. Oregon grape has a single distinct, thick vein that runs from the base to the tip of the leaflet." Surreptitiously, I reached across my fence and plucked a leaflet, turned it over, and there was the evidence: it was leatherleaf mahonia. Oh dear.



Photo: NC State University. NC Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox

To its credit, this plant has an interesting history. You have probably heard about Robert Fortune, one of the best known of the "plant-hunters" who travelled to the Far East in the 19th century to search for plants for English gardens. Fortune has been described by [www.PlantExplores.com](http://www.PlantExplores.com) as "a mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a surly personality. Little is known of Fortune's early years, and in his life, he made no effort to share this information." But he quickly rose from his childhood in Scotland to secure a position at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Then, in 1840, he and his family moved to London to take up a position at the Horticultural Society of London's garden at Cheswick. Following the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, in early 1843, he was commissioned by the Horticultural Society to undertake a three-year plant collection angry mobs caught up in a xenophobic frenzy, to killer storms in the Yellow Sea, to pirates on the Yangtze River, he managed to survive them all. He eventually became proficient enough with speaking Mandarin that he was able to adopt the local dress and move among the populace largely unnoticed. By shaving his head and adopting a ponytail, this rather gruff Scotsman was able to effectively blend in. So well in fact, that he was able to enter the forbidden city of Soochow (now Wuhsien) unchallenged.

Fortune's most famous accomplishment was to smuggle tea plants from China and into the hands of the British East India Company—an act that broke the back of the Chinese monopoly on tea and that eventually led to the Opium Wars. A lesser-known deed was to acquire an interesting plant growing inside the walled garden of a Chinese nobleman in Peking. Fortune climbed the wall, stole the plant, and brought it to Thomas Beale, the British consul in Shanghai. He named it *Mahonia beali*. (It has since been classified as a barberry, thus the change in its botanical name.)



There have been many advocates for Fortune's plant, among them gardeners and landscape designers and those who value its medicinal uses. The National Institutes of Health reports: "Plants of the genus *Mahonia* Nuttall (Berberidaceae) have a long history of medical use in Traditional Chinese Medicine for the treatment of a wide range of health disorders, such as tuberculosis, periodontitis, dysentery, pharyngolaryngitis, eczema, and wounds." A blogger named Greg says that "feng shui enthusiasts appreciate Leatherleaf Mahonia for more than its

lush appearance. It's believed to enhance chi, the vital life force, bringing balance and prosperity to a space." And an article by Alex on Sarcraft notes that, though the plant contains berberine which is toxic when consumed in large quantities, the chemical also "is medicinal when used with the correct dosage and delivery method. The primary way is with a decoction of the roots, inner bark, or dried leaves. All parts of the plant contain berberine, so it doesn't matter much what Mahonia pieces you use to make your decoctions." Some wilderness survivalists point out that you can eat the berries—until you find something better!

So, there are many admirers of leatherleaf mahonia, for good reasons. One gardener (who posts on [www.Debsgarden.squarespace.com](http://www.Debsgarden.squarespace.com)) tries to reassure herself about its place in her garden: "Mahonia does self-seed, but I can easily pull up the small ones by hand. Compared to Boston ivy, a woodland monster I battle constantly, my mahonias are well behaved wimps. I think it is beautiful. I like the way it complements the nandina domestica that also grows in my woodlands, another plant considered an invasive." However, later on, she looks over her garden wall and sees "Beyond the big brush pile, in a part of the woods I rarely see, there was a swath of nandinas and some mahonias." She ends with the following message: "Long ago a gardener who loved ivy planted some here and there. Now the stuff is climbing into the trees and swallowing the woods. I do not want my nandina and mahonia to be such a curse to future gardeners."

Neither do I. The Western Pennsylvania Conservancy reports that "In the United States, leatherleaf mahonia has primarily escaped cultivation and been found in wild populations across the southeastern states, from Maryland down to northern Florida, and west to states along the Mississippi River. Some infestations have been observed in northeast states as well,

including New York and New Jersey.” And there are some along the banks of our own Woods Creek.

So, I’m trying to decide on a gentle way to tell my neighbor about his beloved plant. In the meantime, I’m quickly digging up every small mahonia that the birds plant in my yard.

## **Addendum to Mahonia: Nandina**

*By Louise Brennan*



The parallels between *nandina domestica* and leatherleaf mahonia are so great that I could almost just write “ditto for nandina” after my article on mahonia. Introduced from China as an ornamental in 1804, nandina is part of the Berberidaceae (barberry) family of plants and is now listed on the invasive species lists in North Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, and Florida, and it may soon make the list in many other Southern states including Virginia. It is also known as heavenly bamboo and sacred bamboo, but as Sarah Coffey at Lewis Ginter notes, “Despite the name, this member of the Dirty Dozen is neither a true bamboo nor heavenly.” Interestingly, as the Virginia Cooperative Extension reports, “34 percent to

83 percent of the total number of invasive taxa (species, varieties, or cultivars) in the U.S. had a horticultural origin.” It even grows at Lewis Ginter, though it is scheduled for removal.

Nandina thrives almost anywhere, and its bright red berries make it appealing for gardeners. It likes shade or sun, it tolerates almost any soil conditions, and thus it flourishes in our forests and forest edges crowding out native plants. Its berries, though pretty, are poisonous to people, pets and wildlife. Sarah Coffey adds a sad note to this information: “If there aren’t other foraging options, birds (who also inadvertently spread *N. domestica* seeds) will gorge on berries. Sadly, research shows that multiple bird species, though most notably cedar waxwings, have died after eating too many *N. domestica* berries.”

As one naturalist put it, the easiest way to get rid of nandina is simply not to plant it in the first place. Coffey offers another option: “If you must, please choose sterile cultivars like “Firepower” and “Blush Pink”. If you choose to keep your Nandina, please remove and bag the berries and dispose of them in the trash (*not the compost*) before they spread or poison local birds.”

If you decide to dig up your nandina, be sure to capture all the roots. And then think about some native alternatives. Many gardeners recommend winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) which has bright berries in winter which are not toxic to wildlife; in fact, they are a favorite of birds. The SC Native Plant Society offers the following list of other alternative plants (click on the plant name for a photograph):

- [Red buckeye \(\*Aesculus pavia\*\)](#) – favorite of Ruby Throated Hummingbird
- [Beautyberry \(\*Callicarpa Americana\*\)](#) – Host for Rustic Sphinx Moth
- [Witch hazel \(\*Hamamelis virginiana\*\)](#) – Moth pollinator, Host for 58 species
- [Oakleaf hydrangea \(\*Hydrangea quercifolia\*\)](#) – Seeds feed birds & mammals
- [Possumhaw \(\*Ilex decidua\*\)](#) – Feeds birds and brilliant fall color
- [Spicebush \(\*Lindera benzoin\*\)](#) – Good fall color, feeds birds and butterflies

My husband has loved our nandina for many years and uses the berries all winter in flower arrangements. In order to preserve our marriage, I vowed to say nothing further about the plant—until I read about the cedar waxwings. Now even my husband is talking about replacements.

<https://www.scnps.org/nandina-a-not-so-heavenly-bamboo/>  
<https://www.lewisginter.org/nandina/>  
[https://www.inaturalist.org/guide\\_taxa/354716](https://www.inaturalist.org/guide_taxa/354716)

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