

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

OCTOBER 2025



INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

- Gardening Events, p. 2
- Fall Garden Tasks, p. 2-3
- Become a Master Gardener, p. 4
- Common Evening Primrose, p. 5-6
- Learning How to Grow Dahlias, p. 7
- 'Junk Trees and the Native Understory, p. 8-9

Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners' community newsletter.

Each month we will be bringing you relevant seasonal horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on. Subscription information is on the last page of this newsletter.

Next RAMGA Program: Saturday, November 15, 10:30am, Rockbridge Regional Library's Piovano Room. "Heirloom Apples" with Regina Donald of Wilbourn House Orchard in Brownsburg.

LOCAL FARMERS MARKETS

- **Lexington Farmers Market**, behind the Southern Inn, Weds., 8am – 12:30pm
 - **Rockbridge Baths Farmers Market**, RB Fire Station, Sat., 9am – 11am
 - **Glasgow Farmers Market**, corner of 10th St. and Kanawha, Fri, 10am – 2pm and Sat., 9am – noon
 - **Kerrs Creek Community Market**, 27766 West Midland Trail, Sat., 9am – noon
 - **Fairfield Farmers Market**, 5613 North Lee Highway, Sat., 9am – noon
 - **Seasons' Yield Farm Market**, 165 Oakland Circle, Raphine, 2nd and 4th Saturdays, 10am – 2pm
 - **Buena Vista Farmers Market**, 21st and Magnolia Ave., Thursdays, 2pm – 6pm
-

FALL GARDEN TASKS

- Plant your garlic bulbs. Don't use grocery store garlic bulbs as they have often been treated with preservatives.
- Plant cover crops on the bare soil in your vegetable garden.
- If not planting a cover crop, mulch beds so no bare soil is exposed.
- Remove spent annuals and compost them.
- Save seeds from desirable plants. Remember, if the plant is a hybrid, it may not come true.
- Stake mums if needed and continue to water and fertilize.
- Lift tender bulbs such as cannas or dahlias after the first frost.
- Finish your planting before the first frost, usually around October 15 in Rockbridge County.
- Plant spring bulbs.
- Plant cool season annuals such as annual poppies, stock, larkspur and snapdragons.
- Divide daylilies, peonies, and iris.
- Fall is usually a good time to plant trees and shrubs.
- Reseed lawn.
- Compost your dead leaves instead of bagging them. Run over them first with your lawn mower so when added to your compost pile, they will break down faster.
- Plant cool weather vegetables such as greens for a late fall, early winter harvest.
- Prune late summer and fall flowering shrubs after they go dormant or in the spring.
- Watch for plant sales. Nurseries usually want to sell down their inventory before winter. Milmont in Stuart's Draft has all perennials at 50% off now. When replanting be sure and loosen the root ball. Many of their plants are pot bound.
- Male deer scrape their horns in the fall along the bark of young trees to rub the summer velvet off their horns and to mark their territory. Wrap the trunks with plastic tree guards, chicken wire or plastic mesh to prevent deer damage and remove in the spring.
- Check trees and shrubs for bagworms. Pick off and burn any egg cases that you can find.

- Don't be alarmed if some evergreens begin to shed their yellowing interior needles. This is natural this time of the year.
 - Make sure you thoroughly clean under roses and discard the debris. This will help prevent black leaf spot in the coming year.
-

RAMGA Goes Viral

The Jackson House Museum has taken advantage of the knowledge and expertise of the Master Gardeners who volunteer in the Museum Garden by recording weekly *Garden Chats*. Each video is 30 seconds in length and featured on the Museum's Facebook page. Here is a clip of Margaret Herman talking about how to plant and harvest garlic. <https://www.facebook.com/reel/539369315156011>

Follow the Jackson House Museum on Facebook to observe our Master Gardeners in action

Leave the Leaves

Virginia has roughly 470 moth species and 170 butterfly species. Of these 570 species, only 12 species, including Monarch, are known to migrate. So how do the other 558 species of moths and butterflies survive winter? Their pupae overwinter in fallen leaves. <https://xerces.org/leave-the-leaves>





Join us for the Master Gardener Volunteer Training Program for 2026

What Is Involved

- Read 19 chapters in the Master Gardener Handbook
- View on-line modules that illustrate and supplement the Handbook
- Take 16 open book on-line quizzes
- Participate in 10 hands-on labs
- Complete 50 volunteer hours with other Master Gardener volunteers in sharing knowledge with the public

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodations to participate in any Rockbridge Master Gardener events, contact the Rockbridge Extension Office at (540)463-4734/TDD* during business hours of 8:30am and 5pm to discuss accommodations. *TDD number is (800)828-1120



Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments, and is an equal opportunity employer. For the full non-discrimination statement, please visit ext.vt.edu/accessibility.

Our Mission

Master Gardener Volunteers are trained to support Virginia Cooperative Extension by sharing knowledge with the public about all aspects of gardening

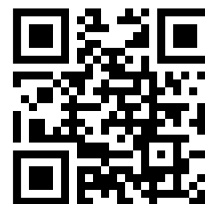
What We Do

- Provide information to the public on best garden practices, including the Help Desk, Plant Clinic, and other public information tabling events
- Engage and encourage children through classroom instruction and hands-on gardening
- Work as a part of a team to plan and implement public demonstration gardens
- Partners with the Rockbridge Regional Library to support a Seed Library

Information and registration at

www.ramga.org/join-us

Registration opens on-line at noon on Sunday, October 26, 2025



Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Association
P.O. Box 1383
Lexington, VA 24450

Unexpected Pleasures

By Louise Brennan

We work hard in our gardens—planning, planting, nurturing, rejoicing (and occasionally dealing with disappointment by hoping for the next year). But every now and then, we're treated to a surprise: a wonderful newcomer whom we had nothing to do with.

This summer I noticed, at the back of a deep bed that borders a foundation wall, a weedy looking, rather gangly new plant. I kept meaning to pull it out, but in the meantime, it grew taller and taller, finally topping out at 6 feet! Then it began producing small yellow, sweet-smelling flowers that the hummingbirds loved. It was, as you will have guessed, Common Evening Primrose (*Oenothera biennis*).

Many of you know this native well. Also known as King's Cureall, night candle, fever plant, night willow herb, scabish, sun crop, scurvish, and wild beet, it grows throughout the Northeast, often springing up along roadsides or in fields; it prefers medium to dry soil (which we've definitely had these last few months!). A biennial, it grows vegetatively the first year and then completes its life cycle the second. Most commonly, *O. biennis* grows as a low, spreading herb in the first year, just a few centimeters tall, with its leaves spreading out in a rosette to cover the ground, while storing energy in a thick root. In the second year, it grows up much taller, on a semi-woody stem, which then flowers and seeds. The seeds of *O. biennis* can remain viable in the soil seed bank for 70 years or more! The flower structure has a bright nectar guide pattern, invisible to the naked eye. This pattern is apparent under ultraviolet light and visible to its pollinators.

The seeds of the plant are important food for birds, including American goldfinch, Northern bobwhite, and mourning dove, and it is a larval host for both the primrose moth and the white-lined sphinx moth. I'm particularly charmed by the primrose moth (*Schinia florida*), a beautiful pink and yellow moth that feeds, lays eggs, and even sleeps in the plant's yellow blossoms. In the words of Bryan Pfeiffer, a Vermont naturalist and guide, "Primrose moths fly about searching for the evening primrose. No one in Vermont or New Hampshire is far from an evening primrose blossom, which means no one is far from a primrose moth. I often encounter primrose moths still buried in a blossom the day after their night of binge-nectaring. They're like a drunk passed out at the bar at dawn. Only the moth is harder to spot than a drunk. Those pink wings are buried out of sight in yellow flower petals. The only wing portions still visible are the trailing edges, the yellow edges, which conveniently resemble the yellow edges of the primrose petals. The moth has evolved with wise camouflage so it can sit and drink nectar, presumably unnoticed by predators." The adults lay eggs on the flower, and the emerging caterpillars feed on the plant.



Pink wing tips reveal Schinia florida in the flower of the evening primrose, unnoticed by predators.



Primrose moth, Schinia florida , on an evening primrose with petals removed to reveal the insect.

(For those of you who love moths, it's interesting to note a look-alike to the primrose moth, the Rosy Maple Moth (*Dryocampa rubicunda*). This moth is larger, feeds on maple and oak trees as larvae, and has a yellow stripe down the middle of its wings; some scientists describe the coloring as resembling the colors of a sunset. The rosy maple moth inhabits forests, as you might expect, and though I see them both in New Hampshire, they do not seem to compete for food or territory.

The moths are charming, but it turns out that the evening primrose is not just a pretty face, with a pretty occupant; it has a long history of providing food and medicine. The Cherokee, Iroquois, Ojibwas, and Potawatomi were among several Native American tribes that used evening primrose. They ate the cooked greens when young, made a tea, and concocted a hot root poultice for piles. In addition, they used the plant's juices as a balm for skin inflammation, bruises, and minor wounds. Today, according to the Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, evening primrose oil dietary supplements are promoted for atopic dermatitis (a type of eczema), rheumatoid arthritis, premenstrual syndrome (PMS), breast pain, menopause symptoms, and other conditions. The oil from evening primrose seeds contains omega-6 fatty acids, including gamma-linolenic acid (GLA).

I don't plan to eat my evening primrose, but I love watching it open each night and welcome in the moths. And it's a real joy to be given an unexpected gift. I'm learning to scan my garden for "weeds" that might also be treasures.

Sources:

<https://www.prairiemoon.com/oenothera-biennis-common-evening-primrose>
<https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/evening-primrose-oil>
https://www.adkinsarboretum.org/programs_events/ipp/evening-primrose.html
https://magickalspot.com/evening-primrose/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=21290333211&gbraid=0AAAAADI3CuWogtJ1urZwQATm5GuFABhYB&gclid=CjwKCAjwlaTGBhANEiwAoRgXBd6XeiiM3bvFEB82w8rBUWC8Oq10GkY3pK5mZE0JKdcvwk_NQs2uuRoCJ9IQAvD_BwE
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oenothera_biennis
https://northernwoodlands.org/outside_story/article/primrose_moth_and_its_lovely_hangout
<https://biophilicrealm.com/primrose-moth-vs-rosy-maple-moth/>

Learning How to Grow Dahlias: A Master Gardener's Shares Her Research and Journey

By Jennifer Olewine

In the Spring of 2024, I turned a small garden area into a dahlia garden. Despite making every mistake possible, by the early summer, I had an explosion of numerous colorful blooms. The bed is near my daughter's bedroom window. I chose this spot hoping she would enjoy looking out at it. So, I planted the tubers in the ground and waited. In about 7 weeks, I was already getting some blooms! I was ecstatic about my dumb luck. I now have fresh dahlias in multiple rooms of the house all summer.

Perhaps my favorite part about the dahlia bed was the pollinator activity. So many bees, butterflies, and moths buzzed the garden into life.

The garden bed gets 6-8 hours of sunlight, which is ideal for dahlias. I discovered that they also need protection from the afternoon sun on very warm days. I learned that dahlias prefer slightly acidic soil. The recommended pH is 6.5, and the soil



should drain well. Overwatering is a potential pitfall, so I avoided watering until the soil turned muddy. This helps to prevent soggy roots. My research advised planting after the danger of frost is over in the spring. One source recommended planting them around the same time as tomatoes.

Dahlias are tuberous plants and members of the Asteraceae family. The flowers are so diverse in size, shape, and color. They should be planted 6-8 inches deep with the eyes facing up. It is best to plant them about 3 feet apart and then cover them with 1-3 inches of soil. No mulching is necessary. One can begin watering once the sprouts are above the soil.



Because of their height or large blooms, dahlias should be staked. It is a good idea to go ahead and stake early to avoid impaling or damaging the roots. Blooming usually takes place about 8 weeks after planting. Water every 2 weeks (or more for hot and dry conditions). Fertilize once sprouting and then about every 2 weeks. Use a low-nitrogen fertilizer (5-10-10 or 10-20-20). Once the plant is about a foot tall, pinch off 3-4 inches of the center branches (this is said to make bushier plants and increase stem count and length). If a plant is dead headed as the flowers fade, it will bloom more. In fact, the more one cuts, the more the plant blooms.

Dahlias make beautiful bouquets. It is best to cut stems in the morning before the heat of the day arrives. I have read that the

tubers are edible and said to taste like a potato or radish. They symbolize creativity, inner strength, and grace. They are Mexico's national flower and said to be Queen Victoria's favorite.

If you'd like a low maintenance, seemingly tolerant, and adaptable garden, consider the dahlia. Besides their tolerance for green gardeners (like me), other desirable qualities of the dahlia include tubers being able to survive our winters. I have never moved the tubers from their original planting positions. In my opinion, they are very easy on the eyes as well with their different colors, shapes, sizes. I guarantee that the bees and pollinators will flock to them.

"Junk Trees" and the Native Understory

By Eileen Ellsworth of Plant NOVA Natives

Take a moment to stand in the scaly shoes of a migrating songbird along the Atlantic Flyway this fall. Passing through Virginia, you will still have a long way to go before reaching your southern wintering grounds. Imagine your relief when, after an entire night of flying, you find a stopover habitat to rest and refuel before the next leg of the journey. And what is your favorite food from the on-site offerings? Berries that grow on native trees and shrubs, all of which are wildlife powerhouses. Despite that, some of the best producers are labeled "junk trees" in today's gardening and landscaping industries because they aren't someone's idea of what a yard tree should look like.

To show how far afield we have drifted in our plant-think, consider the results of this [2022 study by the Center for Conservation Biology](#) (CCB). Researchers working on the eastern shore of Virginia analyzed the nutritional content of several native plant berries to discover which ones provide the biggest energy boost for migrating birds. Next, they measured levels of berry removal from plants during the fall migration to determine which berries were most preferred. Considerable overlap existed between the most nutritious and the most popular native plant berries.

The most nutritious native tree berries, starting with the best, were

1. Sassafras
2. Bayberry
3. Virginia Creeper
4. Pokeweed
5. Devil's Walking-stick
6. American Beautyberry
7. Hackberry
8. Wild grapes.

The most preferred native plant berries, starting with the most popular, were

1. Sassafras
2. Devil's Walking-stick
3. Pokeweed
4. Virginia Creeper



Virginia Creeper berries

5. American Beautyberry
6. Bayberry
7. Hackberry
8. American Holly.

American beautyberry



These plants are not just profuse berry producers. They are classic native understory shrubs and trees that have been disappearing from our landscapes in modern times. White-tailed deer have over-browsed the understory. Non-native invasives outcompete the natives. Plant diseases proliferate as the climate warms. And humans persist in calling some native plants “junk” and discourage their purchase. It is a perfect storm of destructive pressures and wrong thinking. At least the thinking part is something we can reverse along with the behavior that flows from it.

Let us ditch the “junk tree” label and take a closer look at three rock star “*treasure trees*” included in the CCB study.

Sassafras: Sassafras berries were rated #1 in the study for both nutritional value and bird popularity. *Who knew?* Woodpeckers, mockingbirds, catbirds, flycatchers, phoebes, vireos, wild turkeys, and yellowthroat warblers all enjoy the feast. The tree also provides excellent support for squirrels, rabbits, and other mammals, and hosts some very cool moth species such as the Imperial, Promethea, Cecropia, and Io moths as well as the remarkably handsome Spicebush Swallowtail caterpillar.

Sassafras grows very fast and reaches heights of 30-60 feet in ideal conditions. You’ll need to plant more than one if you want berries, as only the female trees produce them. White-tailed deer relentlessly browse the tree, so some fencing is recommended for the first few years. Flower and berry production begins at ten years, and the abundant clusters of yellow flowers in April and May are simply spectacular. The fruit ripens in September, just in time for the fall migrations. The berry’s appearance has been likened to a blue-black egg sitting atop a bright red golf tee. Its leaves are just as unique. Three distinct leaf shapes - the mitten, the three-lobed, and the oval - all grow on the same tree and turn bright yellow, orange, and red in the fall.

Its wildlife value and unique features say it all.

Devil’s walking-stick: The CCB study rated Devil’s Walking-stick berries as #5 for nutritional value and #2 in popularity. Cedar waxwings, wood thrushes, white-throated sparrows, Swanson's thrush, American robins, gray catbirds, northern mockingbirds, rose-breasted grosbeaks, dark-eyed juncos, and various migrating warblers are all avid consumers.

Another fast grower, the tree/shrub reaches heights of 10-30 feet, making it ideal for yards and gardens where larger canopy trees can’t fit. It also reproduces quickly by suckering roots and often forms colonies

in open fields, wood margins, and moist woods. You only need to purchase and plant one specimen to set fruit, and berries appear as early as year three or four.

Devil's Walking-stick is a native plant that looks positively exotic. Spot it once and you will never forget it. Prominent thorns grow along the trunk, stems, and leaf stalks (thus, the label "junk"). The thorns give the plant its name while also discouraging most deer browse. Small white or creamy white flowers appear in mid-to-late summer and form showy, fragrant canopies above the huge compound leaves, attracting many pollinators. When dark purple berries appear in the fall, they hang on stalks that have turned a vivid burgundy or lacy red.

This plant is just plain crazy beautiful. *Note from Faith: This plant is extremely invasive and has taken over Boxerwood's wooded area near the Fairy Forest.*

American Beautyberry We mention this even though it is native further south but not in Northern Virginia, because we would like to warn people not to buy the wrong species by mistake, which happens commonly. The CCB study rates American Beautyberry #6 for berry nutrition and #5 for bird popularity. While Sassafras and Devil's Walking-stick rarely appear on landscaping plans, American beautyberry is a frequent choice and never designated "junk" in anyone's book.

In spring and summer, the plant looks ordinary with unremarkable leaves and inconspicuous flowers. Come the fall, however, the plant transforms itself as tight clusters of bright purple berries ripen along the entire length of the stem. Those berries last for weeks, but their taste improves as they age and ferment on the stems, making them a fan favorite for migrating birds. American robins, mockingbirds, cardinals, towhees, thrashers, gray catbirds, and finches are known customers among 40 species relying on the tree for late season food.

American Beautyberry also grows fast to reach a mature size of up to about 8 feet. Deer eat it, so fencing is recommended until it is well established.

Here is the warning. When purchasing American Beautyberry, be aware that Asian cultivars are often sold under the name "Beautyberry" and can be confused with the straight native. Only purchase *Callicarpa americana*. Mislabeling is common even then. Devil's Walking-stick (*Aralia spinosa*) also has an invasive look-alike (*Aralia elata*.)

When we label a native plant as "junk", it is often because of thorns, poor-quality wood, or aggressive growth and spread. But the label also reflects our severed connection with nature. A "junk" tree or "brush" shrub may or may not please us, but it is a migrating bird's vital food source, an uncommon moth's host plant, and a native bee's essential nectar source. For more suggestions, see the [Plant NOVA Trees website](#).

One person's junk has always been another's treasure. Let's value what matters.

To subscribe to this newsletter, click
<https://www.ramga.org/what-s-happening>

EDITOR: FAITH VOSBURGH, fvosburgh@gmail.com



Virginia Cooperative Extension is a partnership of Virginia Tech, Virginia State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and local governments, and is an equal opportunity employer. For the full non-discrimination statement, please visit ext.vt.edu/accessibility.