

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

February 2025



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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.

SAVE THE DATE

**Saturday, April 26th, noon – 1:30pm, RAMGA
Native Tree and Shrub Giveaway with Kid-Friendly
Activities.**

RARA Community Room, 350 Spotswood Dr.

RAMGA will be selling native plants as well as Rte. 11 Native Plant Nursery. Many informational booths.



Plants from last year's sale

LOCAL GARDENING EVENTS

Thursday, February 13, 8:00am – 4:45pm, Paramount Theatre, Charlottesville. 40th Annual Piedmont Landscape Association Seminar, “The Ecological Landscape”. This year’s speakers include:

- Hannah Lewis: Using Mini-Forests to Rewild our Communities for Climate Resistance
- Harland Patch: The Biodiverse Pollinator Garden: Lessons from Research & Practice
- Paul Tukey: The Sustainable Art of Lawns and Landscape
- Paul Westervelt: The New Perennial Movement & Why It Matters

More information found at <https://www.piedmontlandscape.org/seminar2025.html>

Thursday, February 20, 6pm, “Bees Beyond Honey: Understanding the Roles of Native and Managed Bees in Pollination,” webinar featuring [Sam Droege](#), Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS); [Dave Hunter](#), Founder & Owner, Crown Bees; and [Lora Morandin](#), Associate Director, Pollinator Partnership.

<https://wildones.org/understanding-native-and-managed-pollinators/>

Wednesday, March 12, 7:15am – 4:00pm. Roanoke Tree Care Workshop: “After the Storm”, sponsored by Trees Virginia, Virginia Western Community College, Roanoke, VA. [Register here](#)

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

Register [here](#)

- 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, 9:30am – 3:45pm, “Grow the Good Life 2025: Critter Control: Protest Your Plants from Unwanted Guests” sponsored by the Bedford Area Master Gardeners, Bethlehem United Methodist Church, 13586 Old Moneta Rd., Moneta, VA. [Register here](#) for in-person and [here](#) for virtual

Wednesday, March 19 (Part 1) and Wednesday, March 26 (Part 2), “Advancements in Our Understanding of Virginia Flora”, the Virginia Native Plant Society’s Annual Winter Workshop on Zoom. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

Saturday, March 22, 9:00am – 3:00pm, Loudoun County Plant Nurture Grow - 14th Annual Gardening Symposium. Academies of Loudoun 42075 Loudoun Academy Drive Leesburg, VA 20175 <https://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/events/annual-symposium/>

Featured Speakers and Programs:

- Thomas Bolles and Mary Sketch Bryant, “4 The Soil”
- Brie Arthur, “Aromatic Symphony: Captivating Garden Fragrances” and “Foodscape Harmony: Embracing Natives and Edibles”

- Janet Draper, “Chasing New Knowledge Among Perennial Change”

The symposium will also feature a marketplace with gardening items from local vendors and lightly used books. Tickets start at \$65* *Additional fee for Panera lunch option. Attendees are welcome to bring their own lunch.

The Goochland-Powhatan Master Gardeners are hosting an educational Spring Garden Fest April 26th. Check out the details here: <https://www.gpmga.org/spring-garden-fest>

Other links of interest:

Here’s the link to the Virginia Cooperative Extension Biweekly newsletter for some upcoming events in Virginia

<https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/biweekly-update/>

Remember to check out the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Facebook page for topics and events of interest. <https://www.facebook.com/share/15aPRP3ufP/?mibextid=wwXlfr>

Check out another great organization that hosts educational events, Sustainability Matters. <https://www.sustainabilitymatters.earth/events>

Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia is offering a Youth Education Program! (YEP!) The [LINK](#) is interesting and might give ideas to parents or grandparents. The website also offers dates and locations for demonstration gardens that might be new to you.

Virginia is for Gardeners is offering a lot of information about resources for the future that might be good to know and plan for. Their website [LINK](#) is interesting.

FOLLOW UP ON RAMGA SEED SWAP

The RAMGA seed give-away on Saturday, January 18th was a huge success. If you missed the event, seeds are now available at the Rockbridge Regional Library, 138 South Main Street in Lexington. Seeds will be offered for free “check-out” while supplies last. To encourage home gardening and sustainable living is RAMGA’s ongoing initiative by providing the community with access to a variety of seeds to plant.



If you were one of the beneficiaries of the seed, remember to scan the QR code on your seed packet or check the link to the seed library on the RAMGA website's homepage for cultural information.



Be sure and check the germination information in the seed library. Some seeds are trickier to start than others. They may need to be stratified (pre-treated to stimulate the natural conditions the seeds would experience over winter, often 30-60 days at 35-40 degrees) or scarified (nicking the hard seed coat). See the following article for more seed pre-treatment information.

Almost every state Extension Agency offers information on seed starting. Their websites often end with ext.edu., making it easy to do a web search. Extension information is consistently reliable. And, of course, there are dozens of YouTube videos. Often seed catalogs offer excellent cultural information. It is in their best interest to hope you succeed with their seeds. One of my favorites is Johnny's Selected Seeds (www.johnnyseeds.com). Their Grower's Library is very good, and they offer a series of free webinars each year that are also archived.

If you have questions, you can always contact the RAMGA Helpline at 540-463-4734 or helpline@ramga.org

Seed Pre-Treatment

Seed dormancy is the state in which seeds will not germinate before protective barriers are broken down. This helps a seed survive in the wild. Dormancy is caused by physical impediments such as a too hard seed coat. In the wild, animal digestion, microorganisms or freezing and thawing will break down these barriers. Chemical inhibitors in the seed can often be broken down by temperature, moisture, or light. We must be a little more proactive when starting seeds at home.

Stratification (temperature)

Many seeds, especially native seeds, require a period of cold to break dormancy and initiate the germination process. This mimics what happens in nature, imitating a natural winter dormant period. Seeds sown outdoors in the fall do not need to be stratified. Most native seeds need at least 60 days of cold, but some may be as short as 30 days while others may be close to 90 days. The seed packet or seed catalog should give you this information, but not always. If you use an internet source, state extension sites are the most useful. Their web addresses end with .edu. The website for the Virginia Cooperative Extension's publications is www.pubs.ext.vt.edu. RAMGA (Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners) maintains a seed library on the www.ramga.org website that has the growing information on seeds available through the RAMGA seed exchange.

How to stratify seed indoors:

Place seeds in a moistened paper towel, sand, peat or vermiculite and seal in a closed plastic bag or container. Mark container/bag for when the seed was placed in the container/bag and when it needs to come out with a permanent marker.

Put the container/bag in the refrigerator at 33 - 40 degrees.

Leave the seeds in for the amount of time it needs to be stratified, usually 30 - 60 days.

Check the seeds periodically for excess moisture.

After removing the seed from the refrigerator, sow in small pots or direct seed outside if weather permits.

Scarification (breaking the seed coat)

Some seeds have a very hard seed coat that needs outside interference to break. In nature, seeds eaten by animals passes through their digestive tract, breaking down the seed coat barrier. We need to take more direct measures. Nicking the seed coat with a file, knife, or sandpaper will work. Some seeds can be soaked overnight in warm water. Usually, these hard-coated seeds are the larger seeds. Some examples would be morning glory, hyacinth bean, or moon flower. Make sure you plant your seeds directly after scarifying them so the tiny embryo inside the seed doesn't dry out.

Sources: <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/extension-gardener-handbook/13-propagation>
<https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-001/426-001.html>
<https://www.uky.edu/hort/sites/www.uky.edu.hort/files/pages-attachments/Scarification.pdf>

FEBRUARY GARDEN CHORES

- Once it starts to warm up a bit towards the end of the month, start cutting back the dead hellebore foliage.
- Having problems with deer browse (aren't we all!)? Check this out from Virginia Tech Extension: <https://mgmv.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/HORT%E2%80%90PDF.pdf>
- Finish up your seed orders and inventory leftover seeds.
- Trim back dormant ornamental grasses.
- Sharpen garden tools.
- Sterilize old flats, plastic pots, and cell packs by soaking for 20 minutes in a 10% bleach solution.
- Take that mower to be serviced before the mad rush in the spring.
- Force some flowering branches.
- Prune roses when the forsythia blooms.

- Start broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, and lettuce seeds indoors.
- Plant peas now through March.
- Continue to provide supplemental food and water for the birds.

Winter is the time to prune many trees and shrubs. Use these handy pruning calendars from Virginia Tech Extension:

https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/430/430-462/430-462_pdf.pdf
https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/430/430-461/430-461_pdf.pdf
https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/430/430-460/430-460_pdf.pdfClean,

National Invasive Species Awareness Week Feb.24th -28th

New Additions to our State Laws Dealing with Invasive Plant Species

Researched and written by Jan Smith

Nothing is static, and as we observe changes in our environment, it is necessary to acknowledge that some plants may become invasive with time. A bill enacted in 2023 requires the state to update its invasive list by January 2024 and every four years thereafter. A bit late, but here are a few of the new plants added to the list that you might see in our area. I have seen them escape into woods and road edges. They are certainly problematic in the eastern part of the state.

[Click here for entire list](#)

Another change enacted is that no state agency shall plant, sell, or propagate any plant listed on the Department of Conservation and Recreation's invasive Plants list, unless necessary for scientific or educational purposes. Our Master Gardener association has had that policy in place for many years.

Regulations are being developed that will require landscapers and planting services to tell a landowner if any of the suggested plants is on the DCR invasive list. Status of regulations requiring landscapers and planting services: [Status is available here](#).

Rockbridge Master Gardeners do Property Visits!

Need help determining if you have invasive plants or need advice on controlling them? Visit our website [click here](#) or email us for a homesite visit at ramgainvasives@gmail.com

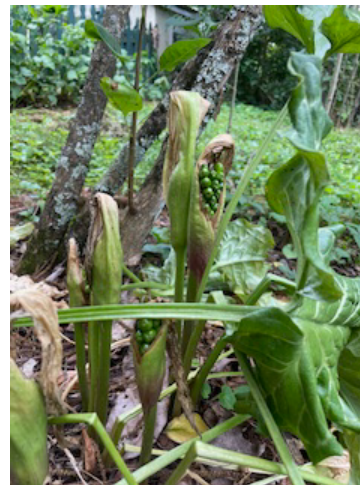
Some invasive shrubs you may be familiar with (photos from the North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox (<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/>))

Leatherleaf Mahonia (*Mahonia bealei*)



Butterfly Bush (*Buddleia davidii*)

And Arum –



Italian Arum: A Sneaky Invasive

Researched and written by Louise Brennan

In 2006, a gardener posted the following advice: “*Arum italicum* is NOT **invasive**...Plant away! It is a bulb that will multiply, but it stays in a clump. You will have lots of time to prevent seeding because the seed takes so long to mature. Even then, it is NOT invasive. *Arum italicum* is NOT invasive. Plant away!” (<https://davegarden.com/community/forums/t/652893/#b>)

Just 20 years later, hardly anyone would offer such advice. *Arum italicum* has been declared an invasive on the West Coast and in much of the mid-Atlantic. Instead of feeling that we “have lots of time to prevent seeding,” many of us feel that we are already losing the battle with this sneaky and fast-spreading plant.

In many ways, this plant is quite attractive, with deep green, variegated, arrow-shaped leaves; it can grow up to 12-18 inches tall and can add visual interest, especially in shady areas. Italian arum has several wonderful names, including Italian Lords-and-Ladies, but its original meaning stems from a Greek word meaning “poisonous.” It is native to Great Britain and much of the Mediterranean region, the Caucasus, Canary Islands, Madeira, and northern Africa. All parts of this plant are poisonous (it contains calcium oxalates), and gardeners are warned to wear gloves when handling it. If ingested, it will cause throat and tongue swelling that will result in difficulty breathing or possible death.

But since most of us are unlikely to ingest it, its real danger is the ease with which it spreads and the difficulty of eradicating it. It grows from corms that are set several inches below ground level with deep roots; these are tricky to dig up since each clump must be completely removed or the plant will happily regenerate. (I’ve been most successful with such digging in the late fall; in the spring the ground is so moist and flaky that it’s almost impossible to get all the roots.) If you are lucky enough to succeed in digging them up, all parts of the plant should be placed in the trash and not your compost bin.

In addition, of course, there are the seeds. The hood-like flowers usually appear in April and May. The flowers have a central spadix, surrounded by a creamy white-colored spathe; they are pollinated by small flies that are attracted to the plant due to the odor of the flowers. (This odor has been described as that of “stale urine,” so it’s no favorite of most gardeners!) After the flowers are spent, the foliage will wither. The plant then produces clusters of berries that are initially green and then transition to orangish-red that remain through August. These spires of orange berries are striking, and the birds in my garden love them; thus, I find new populations occurring wherever the birds leave their droppings.



Another unfair advantage that Italian Arum possesses is its presence in the non-growing seasons when other plants (particularly natives) are dormant. As the National Forest Service notes, “Their off-schedule habits (asynchronous phenologies) can let them take advantage of light when other plants have already shed their leaves and perhaps take in other resources when native species have already shut down. It is kind of like an unwelcome night-owl roommate who raids the fridge while everyone sleeps and co-opts shared spaces with their stuff.” Though it sometimes goes dormant in colder winters, it’s back again in spring and thrives till early summer, taking over spaces where natives like to grow.

There's no question that Italian Arum can be beautiful, especially at this time of year. As I wander my winter garden, I can't help but admire the glossy leaves as they pose against the snow. And for those who love flower arranging, this plant is much valued since it is present and prolific for three seasons. My mother loved it, and I feel a bit guilty as I painstakingly try to dig it up or to cut off the seeds before they can be spread. But the arum knows that I'll never completely win this battle, so maybe there's no need for guilt.

Sources:

<https://www.lewisginter.org/italian-arum/>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/arum-italicum/>

<https://www.nps.gov/articles/autumn-invader-italian-arum.htm>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arum_italicum

From our Friends in Northern Virginia, Plant NOVA Natives:

Clean Water and Native Plants

If your property contains a stream, pond, or any sort of wetland, whether its flow is permanent or intermittent in nature, this article is especially for you! Anyone can directly enhance water quality, and in turn benefit the health of the animal, plant, and human communities that depend upon it, by using native plants to fill the "riparian buffer" adjacent to a water feature. The word "riparian" comes from a Latin word meaning "bank." A riparian buffer protects the wetland from runoff from developed areas, including turfgrass lawns.

If the riparian buffer already contains natural vegetation, you should first control any invasive plants found there. One should also avoid adding any new species, native or otherwise, that will disturb the existing plant community. You may need a waiver from your County to remove existing vegetation and to plant new plants within 100 feet of a stream, shore, or wetland. Maps of these "Resource Protection Areas" can be [found here](#). If the area is currently landscaped or mowed, you may be able to add native plants without a waiver, but you should still check with your county or municipal government.

To figure out if the plants that are present are native or invasive, you can use a free app such as [iNaturalist](#) or a subscription-based app such as [Picture This](#) to help you with the identification. You can

also invite a volunteer from the [Northern Virginia Bird Alliance Wildlife Sanctuary Program](#) to walk the site with you.

Healthy riparian buffers with native plants are beautiful to see and fun to explore. They support a wide diversity of life and create peaceful and inviting landscapes that draw us in to enjoy and connect with the nature they support.

Riparian buffers are also the natural defenders of stream banks. They help stabilize the soil and control soil erosion. This is due to their capacity to slow down and absorb stormwater runoff that would otherwise erode the banks of streams and rivers and fill the Chesapeake Bay with excessive silt. Due to riparian buffer degradation and excessive runoff across Northern Virginia, a massive quantity of silt from our streams and rivers now reaches the Chesapeake where it clogs the gills of wildlife, smothers eggs, buries aquatic insect habitats, and interferes with the production of oxygen by aquatic plants. Anything we do that successfully holds soil will benefit the Bay. Riparian buffers also act as filters that trap pollutants. This protects aquatic life from harmful contaminants and keeps them out of our water supply. Native trees provide the leaves that feed aquatic insects, and their shade lowers the water temperatures, making the environment more hospitable for life. As the earth warms, planting and protecting native plants on riparian borders will become increasingly urgent.

Ideally a riparian buffer should be at least 100 feet wide, but don't let that discourage you, as a buffer of any size is helpful. Try to pick combinations of native plants that would naturally occur along waterways in your region. This will increase the odds of creating a balanced healthy habitat that continues to grow and thrive. Please refer to the resources on the [Plant NOVA Natives website](#) to help you select your plants.

Riparian buffers formed naturally on undisturbed land, holding soil, cooling water, filtering pollutants, and supporting life. It is humans who have disturbed them. Our work now is to take a moment to pause and wonder at the interdependence of land, water, native plants, and animals. Regardless of the other forces at work to degrade our environment, we still have the power to rebuild essential habitats on the lands we control.

Simmer Pots: A Kid-Friendly Activity

By Tamara Teaff

Invite the smells of the garden into your home during the cold winter months. I remember doing this with my grandmother before the days of scented candles or commercial air freshers. Together we would collect ingredients from her winter garden and kitchen. A simmer pot is just a pot filled with

water, to which fragrant items are added while heating on the stove. Probably a crock pot could be used but we did not have one. As the water evaporates, warm and welcoming aromas fill the house.

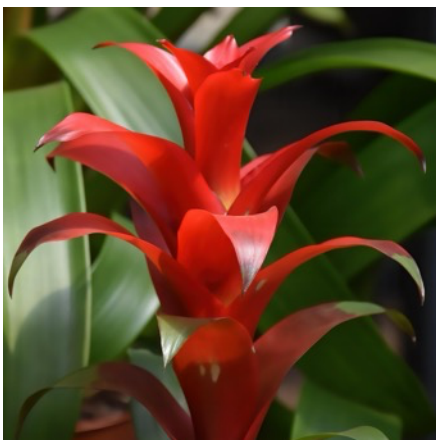
The recipe for your simmer pot depends on your personal taste. Plan with your kid, grandkid, or neighborhood kid. Locate items in your kitchen: citrus peelings, cinnamon sticks, cloves, fresh ginger or cranberries, dried bay leaves. Harvest from your garden: rosemary and conifer needles such as pine or spruce. Be creative. Put your selected ingredients into a pot of water with no lid and simmer. Check the water level from time to time and add more water if needed. My grandmother kept her simmer pot on the top of her wood stove. As a little kid, I thought that we brewed something magical. **WARNING:** With how delicious it smells, and since some of the ingredients are inedible, I do not recommend drinking the liquid. After trying a simmer pot, you will never buy a scented candle again. You and your budding horticulturist will take pride in what you have created together.



Please, Take Me out of Direct Light! Some Plants Don't Want Full Sunshine!

By Karen Carlton

Hello fellow gardening enthusiasts, I have the pleasure of being given this assignment by Faith, who is the editor of this fine newsletter, to write about plants who only need low levels of light. I was eager for the challenge of writing this article. In writing this article I looked for plants that not only needed low levels of light, but plants that were pet and child friendly, as well as some that were very low maintenance plants.



The first plant I'll start with is the Guzmania Bromeliad in the pineapple family. It is a very common houseplant and is seen in many nurseries and big box stores. It is popular because of its clusters of colored blooms of red, orange, yellow, purple and white flowers. Bromeliads are epiphytic, which is to say get their nutrients from the air, rain or water. That is one of the reasons they are so easy to take care of and why they like living in your bathroom. Bromeliads love humidity as they come from tropical places such as

Africa, Central and South America. It would be a little bit of bringing the rainforest vibe into your home.

The second plant I would like to introduce is the Watermelon Peperomia (*Peperomia argyria*). This plant, as the aforementioned Bromeliad, is also not toxic to pets or children. It likes indirect levels of light and moderate amounts of watering. It is one of those plants that you can let a little bit of topsoil get dry and it won't pout at you if you forget to water it. The leaves are striped, similar to the stripes one sees on the outside of a watermelon.

The third plant is the Neanthe Bella Palm or Parlor Palm (*Chamaedorea elegans*). This plant was a favorite of Victorian households due to it not minding being placed in a dark corner. It doesn't need daily watering, and it doesn't like direct sunlight. It can grow to a good size and depending on the size of the pot and plant one could have a small tree in your house. The plant has also been shown to remove indoor air pollutants.

The fourth plant is the Maiden Hair Fern (*Adiantum raddianum*). This is another plant that would do well in the bathroom. It wants indirect sunlight, very humid conditions and warmth surrounding it, another plant to bring that tropical vibe to your home. These plants take 2 to 3 years to mature and live for 15 years.



The last plant in my list and believe me there are many more plants that thrive in low light conditions, is the Cast Iron Plant (*Aspidistra elatior*). This plant is for all of those who say they have a black thumb when it comes to plants. It also is non-toxic to pets and children. It loves to avoid direct sunlight. Please, don't overwater the plant as it likes a little neglect when it comes to its watering needs. The neat thing about this plant are the benefits it brings to your home. It purifies the air, brings some humidity into the air in your home, and it helps to reduce allergens. Another interesting tidbit is this plant originated in Japan and China; in Japan the Cast Iron plant is considered a symbol of Strength.

Well, there you have it, five plants that love low light conditions and thrive in places that could bring their own version of brightness into your home. Who knows maybe there will be a new decorating trend of Jungle Mystique!

Resources:

[https:// BWHPlantco.com](https://BWHPlantco.com)

www.livelyroot.com

www.hgtv.com

www.thespruce.com

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<https://www.ramga.org/what-s-happening>

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