

# THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

March 2023



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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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**Upcoming: Saturday, March 18m 10:30am, RARA Community Room, 350 Spotswood Dr., 'Edible Mushrooms' with Stephen Kaplan of Kaplan's Welcome Home Farms sponsored by RAMGA. Free.**

**There will be all kinds of plants on sale at the program.**

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## IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT:

For many years, the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners Association (RAMGA) has organized an annual community plant sale. It has had many iterations – from its beginnings in the Waddell Elementary parking lot, to the space at W&L, to an online sale during the pandemic, to the Kerr’s Creek Firehouse – each with a common goal: to connect with the community. We thank all of those who have supported it!

The plant sale is a tremendous undertaking that requires a year-round effort from Master Gardener volunteers, and after much consideration, RAMGA has decided to reevaluate the plant sale so that we can best serve our community. While we regret to inform you that we will not be holding our annual, large-scale plant sale this year, we are excited to announce that we plan to have many smaller-scale plant sales throughout the coming year instead.



What does this mean for you?

More opportunities for buying plants! We are bringing back monthly in-person public programs on March 18th, starting with Stephen Kaplan of Kaplan’s Welcome Home Farms, who will speak about edible mushrooms. At this, and at each of our future programs in 2023, we will have plants for sale.

By holding smaller monthly sales in conjunction with our educational events, we hope to help you spread your garden work out throughout the season, provide you with plants at an appropriate time to plant them, and show you how late summer and fall blooming plants look in their prime - which doesn’t happen in the spring! (Did you see those beautiful butterfly weed plants at the Community Festival last summer? As late summer bloomers, those didn’t look like much in the spring at the Plant Sale!)

For the second year, RAMGA will be partnering with the Native Plant Society to give away native trees for Arbor Day on April 29 in the Tractor Supply parking lot (Rain Date TBD). This year, we’re excited to help you add more native plants to your landscape, and we’ve invited Little Bluestem Nursery to sell native plant plugs at this event.

At its core, RAMGA is an educational organization that is meant to share gardening and horticultural knowledge with our community. For us to do so, we need to consider how to best

serve our community and adapt. We hope that by providing free educational programs and smaller, more frequent plant sales, we will make a deeper connection with our community. We welcome your input, ideas for programs, and questions about gardening. Please email us at [info@ramga.org](mailto:info@ramga.org).

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## HAPPENINGS...

Local events are in a larger font

Tuesday, March 7, 7:00pm – 8:00pm. “Good Fire: Prescribed Burns in State Parks” by Al Cire, Natural Resources Specialist, NBSP. Natural Bridge State Park Visitor Center.

**Saturday, March 18, 10:30am. Stephen Kaplan of Kaplan’s Mushrooms will speak on Edible Mushrooms. RARA Community Room, 350 Spotswood Dr., Lexington. Sponsored by RAMGA.**

**Piedmont Master Gardeners’ 2023 Spring Lecture Series:**

“Gardening for a Healthy Planet” will be the theme of the Piedmont Master Gardeners’ 2023 Spring Lecture Series. Presented **online from 7 to 8:15 p.m. on March 2, 9, 16 and 21**, the series will feature lectures on organic food crops with roots in Africa, water features that attract birds and other wildlife, climate-resilient gardens that support pollinators, and landscapes that protect our waterways. Admission is \$10 for each lecture. **To register** for the webinars, visit <https://piedmontmastergardeners.org/events/>.

**Wednesday, March 15, 7am – 4pm. Roanoke Tree Care Workshop**, Virginia Western Community College, Whitman Theatre, 3099 Colonial Ave., SW, Roanoke. \$85. Register here: [www.treesvirginia.org/events](http://www.treesvirginia.org/events)

**The annual Waynesboro Shenandoah Plant Symposium is scheduled for Friday, March 24 at a new location, the Wayne Theatre in downtown Waynesboro.** The roster of speakers includes Kelly Norris (one of my favorite garden speakers), Heather Holm on Native Bees, Felder Rushing of NPR’s Gestalt Gardener, and Yolima Carr of the Elizabeth River Project at Paradise Creek Nature. For more information and to register:

<https://www.waynesboro.va.us/971/Shenandoah-Valley-Plant-Symposium>

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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.

- 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"
- 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
- 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.
- Now is the time to 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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## A Garden for Wildlife

*By Karen Carlton*

A Garden for Wildlife

I have always liked the idea of making my yard into a place where wildlife felt welcomed and not pushed out by civilization. It is a nice idea, but it is just that- a nice idea. The plan that you put in place and is landscaped into your yard is a very different plan and garden.

Planting pollinator plants and native plants in your garden and doing this with your whole yard is a lot of work. You would think that planting native plants would be easy. Pollinator plants are mostly perennials so what could be easier- right? Wrong! The first wake up call to your grand plan is that other animals, for example deer, also like the native plants that are in your yard. Then there are the insects that are a part of the wildlife in nature, yes some are beneficial, others not so much in my opinion. The second wakeup call is weeds- no more needs to be said. The culture that is good for the native plants is also good for the plants you don't want in your garden. The third wakeup call is that you find that your garden won't look as colorful because either the deer or other animals have eaten the blossoms, or they are not naturally very colorful.



So, I have had to compromise in the plants I have in my garden. I like perennials because I tend to be the type of gardener that likes to put a plant in the garden and have it come back the next year. I also like color and some interest in my garden. I have made the decision to have a mix of cultivar flowers and plants along with the native plants. You must believe me it is a work in progress of finding what will work and what doesn't work in my yard. It is a challenge! I also had to think about my neighbors and how my yard looks to them. I can't have it looking like a jungle and I don't want to be a problem for them with my garden.

In my garden, I have nice, raised beds for my herbs and vegetable gardens. The ditch that takes care of the roadway water run-off is planted with a mix of native and non- native plants. The same for the small hill on the side of my house. I have a lawn but as I said I had to compromise. All in all, I think that I have achieved some of my goals. I have noticed that I have a herd of deer that visit my yard regularly. Rabbits have a home somewhere in my yard. I even saw what I think were two groundhogs ambling around in my yard. I can't say that I'm always happy with what they do in my yard, but I do feel some satisfaction that the animals, birds, insects and bees find my yard a place that is welcoming to them.

You don't have to start big to have a nature garden. You just need the sweat and will to plant, tend and water your own little wildlife sanctuary.

## THE ORNAMENTAL GARDEN

### Those Darn Deer!

By Faith Vosburgh

Early spring is prime browsing time for deer – and they are everywhere. We have a brazen roaming herd in our small neighborhood. And many times, I have seen deer even within the Lexington city limits. We use a number of methods here at home to deter the hungry animals – a revolving number of repellents, lots of fencing, tree guards, scare devices – but nothing is infallible.

Adult deer need between 6-8 pounds of green food per 100 pounds of body mass daily (<https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/white-tailed-deer>). That is a lot of plants! I'd rather those



pounds of fodder didn't come from my garden, so I try to plant as many deer-resistant plants as possible.

The following are perennials I have never had deer browse on (and I really should not say never, because if deer are hungry enough, they will eat anything!). You'll notice many of these plants have a fuzzy texture, a distinct smell, or very fine leaves.

We use **creeping thyme** as a ground cover under several trees. Deer have never touched it, probably because it is so close to the ground and has a distinct smell. The plant has a tendency to escape its bounds, but that's fine with us as it is neat and tidy and smells wonderful when mown. Herbs are a good choice. My small herb garden has never been touched by deer and it is unfenced.

I have several kinds of **yarrow** (*Achillia* sp.) growing throughout the gardens and they have never been browsed. Make sure this plant is planted in the sun. In a shadier spot, it is susceptible to powdery mildew. Deadhead to promote flowering.

**Anise hyssop** (*Agastache* sp.) is a favorite of mine and I have several cultivars, including "Blue Fortune", 'Blue Boa', 'Royal Raspberry', and 'Rosie Posie'. Crush the leaves of anise hyssop in your hand and you will smell licorice, probably the reason the deer ignore them. Pollinators love these plants. I've seen flocks of butterflies surround them.

**Lamb's Ear** (*Stachys byzantina*). I use the cultivar 'Countess Helene von Stein' sometime known as 'Big Ears' as a border plant. It does need to be divided often and is a chore to clean up in the spring, but it is indestructible, does make a very neat, nice edging, and best of all, the deer have never touched it. The large gray leaves are very fuzzy. Stay away from the straight species of *Stachys*. Our summer heat wreaks havoc on it. I am not crazy about the flower stalks either and cut them off, but many people love them – and bees do, too.

**Betony** (*Stachys officinalis* 'Hummelo'). In the same species as the above plant, this looks completely different. Perennial Plant of the Year in 2019, the cultivar 'Hummelo' looks more like an anise hyssop, but without the licorice smell. It also spreads by creeping stems as *byzantina*, but I don't find it to be invasive. Blooming throughout the summer, the basal clump of dark green 3"-5" leaves sends up spires of reddish purple flowers at a height of about 1 ½ to 2'. Another great pollinator plant and the butterflies like this one, too

Any of the ornamental **grasses** are a sure bet. And grasses are beautiful! Grasses are a great matrix plant used to fill in blank areas in the garden. Use some of the smaller grasses instead of mulch. I am working on an article on grasses for a later issue of this newsletter, so stay tuned.

**Catmint** (*Nepeta faassenii*) is a standout plant in my gardens. This is not catnip, just a relative, although my cats seemed to like it just as much although mostly they just slept under it, not munched it. Again, this a gray, somewhat fuzzy plant with a distinct smell. The pretty lavender flowers are reminiscent of lavender. Give this plant a hard chop mid-summer and you will have another flush of bloom.

The deer have never touched my numerous **peonies**. Perhaps the leaves are too leathery for their taste. And I think I, too, would have a hard time taking a bite out of a big fluffy peony flower.

Another sure bet are **Lenten roses** (*Helleborus sp.*). These plants prefer some shade but can take some morning sun. This is the time of year to clean up the winter-damaged foliage of these beautiful plants that have been flowering for almost a month now. The leaves, stems, and roots of Hellebores are toxic to mammals.

**Blue False Indigo** (*Baptisia australis*). This is one of my favorite plants. I cannot imagine any garden without it. It is one of those large, sculptural perennials, getting to be about 3-4' tall and wide. It is in the legume family so its roots fix nitrogen to the soil, a good thing for your soil's health. The straight species has blue flowers, but there are many other cultivars out there now. I have pink, yellow, maroon, white ones, with more in several shades of blue. Check out Mt Cuba's research trials on baptisias here <https://mtcubacenter.org/trials/baptisia/> for recommendations. The foliage is a pretty blue-green that turns yellow in the fall. In spring, the lupinelike flowers grow along a flower spike and then in fall, the flowers give way to balloon-like black or brown seed pods. I have lots of these plants and the deer have never touched them.

**Alliums.** There are many new ornamental alliums on the market now, all deer resistant. 'Millenium' is a popular one that I use for edging. There are lots different types of alliums available, with bloom times ranging from spring to fall, most of them with purple flowers, but not all. Check out this article on alliums for more: [https://ahsgardening.org/wp-content/pdfs/OrnAlliums\\_TAG\\_SO14.pdf](https://ahsgardening.org/wp-content/pdfs/OrnAlliums_TAG_SO14.pdf)

Salvias rank right up there with my favorite plants. (Do I have too many favorites?) There are many many different **salvias**. I grow several, but my favorite is one that has been around for a long time, **Salvia x sylvestris 'May Night'**, Perennial Plant of the Year in 1997. I probably have at least fifty of these plants and the deer have ignored them. These are tough plants. They bloom in the spring when their purple spikes of flowers with a reddish undertone just glow in the light of the season. Growing to about 1 – ½' tall and wide, they will rebloom if you cut back the spent flower spikes.

**Threadleaf coreopsis** (*Coreopsis verticillata*) is another great deer resistant plant. You will get the hint from their name – the leaves are very narrow, threadlike. If kept deadheaded, this coreopsis will bloom all summer with a flush of small yellow daisy like flowers. This is another plant I often use as edging.

**Rose Campion** (*Lychnis coronaria*) is another deer-resistant perennial. The fuzzy gray leaves are a good deterrent. This plant blooms in the spring with bright rose magenta flowers and gets to be about 2' tall or so. It will self sow.

Another fine-leaved perennial, **Blue Star Amsonia** (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) has several seasons of interest. In the spring you can enjoy the silvery blue flowers; in the summer the grass-like foliage makes a good vertical accent in the garden and in the fall that foliage turns a beautiful golden yellow.

For further information on deer-resistant plants, Rutgers University has a great list that rates landscape plants by their resistance to deer into categories: rarely damaged, seldom severely damaged, occasionally severely damaged, and frequently severely damaged.

<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/deer-resistant-plants/>

Deterring deer will always be a challenge; there is no surefire answer, just diligence.

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The following article appeared first in the March 2023 issue of "In the Garden" , RAMGA's internal newsletter. My apologies, RAMGA members, for the duplication, but this information is critical for this time of year when we are all in our gardens.

## More on Asian Jumping Worms

*By Faith Vosburgh*

By now, I hope everyone is aware of jumping worms (*Amyntas spp.*), our latest invader. To review, jumping worms differ from earthworms in that their clitellium or collar goes all the way around the body, is smooth and a light color, usually light gray to milky-white. But an even more distinctive feature is their wild thrashing motion when we uncover them. They can flip themselves up to a foot in the air!

They can be found in the upper 2 – 3” of the soil and feed on leaf litter and mulch. This removes the organic matter, changes the moisture level of the soil, and greatly diminishes the soil structure beneath. Nutrient levels fall and soil erosion is increased. Not only do our gardens suffer, but the forest floor also bears the burden of these creatures. By disturbing the soil, they can also help spread invasive plant species.



*Asian jumping worm – the head is on the left. Notice the putty-colored clitellium band, a jumping worm identifier*

These worms reproduce readily, and each year can have two hatches. They are asexual and mature in just 60 days. We will start to see small ones in March/April, depending on when temperatures reach 50 degrees. The best time to see them is June and July. Fortunately, the worms are annual and will die off at the last frost – but by then the soil will be full of cocoons about the size of a mustard seed, just waiting to hatch the following year.

There is no one solution for eradicating these worms. One of the reasons there is not going to be RAMGA’s large annual May plant sale this year is the need to develop protocols for dealing with these invaders.

What can we do? And remember, currently, there is not one good solution.

- Keep an eye out for the worms. Scratch the leaf litter or mulch and you will see them wiggling away. Their castings (feces) look like coarse coffee grounds. The cocoons and then the worms can be found not only in the ground, but in delivered mulch, potted plants, tire treads, and landscaping equipment.

- Clean off the bottom of your garden shoes and hiking boots. The tiny cocoons can easily be caught in the shoe's treads and moved around the landscape.
- Purchase mulch or compost from a reputable dealer who has heat-treated the materials for at least 3 days at 130 degrees or purchase bagged mulch.
- This may work (there have been mixed results): mix a gallon of water with 1/3 cup mustard powder and pour into the soil. This will drive any worms to the surface where you can easily destroy them. Note: Mustard is not lethal to earthworms.
- Solarize your soil in late spring or summer by covering the infested area with clear plastic for two or three weeks until the temperature reaches 104 degrees for at least three days.
- Buy bare root stock whenever possible.
- When digging plants from the garden, shake and then spray off **all** the dirt from the roots. Swish them in a pail of water and be sure to work carefully around tiny root hairs. Repot the bare-rooted items in a soilless mixture or a bagged sterile potting soil. Strain the water and place any solids in a trash bag in the sun.
- Incorporate biochar or diatomaceous earth into your soil.
- Handpick the jumping worms and place them in a clear plastic bag and leave in the sun for at least 10 minutes. Or – dump them in a pail of soapy water.

Here is a great homeowner handout I came across from the NY Invasive Species Research Institute and their Jumping Worm Outreach & Management Working Group.

<https://cctompkins.org/resources/jumping-worm-fact-sheet>

If it is not one pest, it is another. As you all know, a gardener's work is never done. Stay vigilant!

<https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/103692>

<https://warren.cce.cornell.edu/gardening-landscape/warren-county-master-gardener-articles/invasive-asian-jumping-earthworms>

<https://www.fs.usda.gov/features/invasive-jumping-worms-can-change-their-world>

[https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs\\_ext\\_vt\\_edu/ENTO/ENTO-427/ENTO-427.pdf](https://www.pubs.ext.vt.edu/content/dam/pubs_ext_vt_edu/ENTO/ENTO-427/ENTO-427.pdf)

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