

Summer 2024

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Into the Garden

Leadership Team Letter

Jan Smith and Vicki Hall

Perhaps we should give up on our gardens ever looking like the cover of a gardening magazine. It's too hot and especially too dry. A pickaxe is required to dig out the new species of weeds showing up that seem to thrive in dry heat. Wells may be deep and have great pressure, but using a lot of water to keep a flower garden looking top notch is perhaps not a wise use of this resource. The trend definitely seems to be earlier and longer summer droughts. Instead of working in your garden, try observing and seeing which plants look reasonably well and are being used by the wildlife.

Here are observations at 3 pm of what is happening now:

*Too hot for many butterflies; they seem to prefer morning

*The native mints, *Pycnanthemum virginiana* and the *P. muticum* are clear winners. They are full of bees large and small plus a few

butterflies. And they are deer resistant.



Pycnanthemum muticum

*The bumble bees methodically circle around the coneflower head gathering nectar rather than flitting from flower head to flower head as they do with other flowers.



Echinacea purpurea

*The woodland sunflower is the host plant for the Silvery Checkerspot but today not much

is happening on it. But it is very cheery.

Many shrubs are suffering. Jackson Garden lost a Sweetshrub, *Calycanthus florida*, and one of my Bottlebrush buckeyes, *Aesculus parviflora*, is not long for this world. Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentali*, a riparian species, is doing well.

My Coralberry shrub just seems to be a green hedge, but I happened to stop one day and then heard a roar --- hundreds of tiny bees all over the barely opened flowers. Who knew?

It's much more interesting to stop, look and listen in your garden these days than to try and clear it of weeds. Perhaps we can learn and edit our

gardens for the future. Check for a timely email from Tech about alerting us to an upcoming webinar, **Eco-friendly Gardening in a Changing Climate**, September 14, 2024, presented by Rapidan River Master Gardeners – Featuring Joe Lamp'l, Peggy Singleman, and Kirsten Conrad. [Learn more](#)

Jan and Vicki

FYI

Margo Clegg, Class of 2024, completed her 50 hour intern volunteer hours and is now a certified EMG. She is pictured with the Boxerwood Pollinator Demonstration Garden team. Congratulations, Margo!



Upcoming RAMGA Field Trip: Saturday, September 28, 10 – noon. [Quarry Gardens, Schuyler, VA](#). A tour followed by a picnic break and then another tour and discussion focused on Aster and Goldenrod identification. Rain date, Thursday, Oct. 3rd. This will be joint excursion with the Upper James River Chapter of the VA Native Plant Society. For more information and/or register, contact Jan Smith, janhuntersmith@gmail.com

Please respond to the recent RAMGA survey by August 6th. The Leadership team looks forward to your input.

Mark your calendars for the annual RAMGA fall picnic to be held at Lake Robertson on Saturday, October 5th at noon.

RAMGA CLASS OF 2024

Lab #6 Native, Non-Native and Invasive Plants

“What in the World is THIS plant?”

by intern, Pam Lightfoot with photos by Vera Winkler

The Rockbridge Area Master Gardener Class of 2024 participants arrived at The RARA Community Room on Saturday, April 27 to discover that the meeting room was transformed into a small forest. The instructors (Jan Smith, Karen Lyons, Peggy Dyson-Cobb and Peggy Agnor) outdid themselves with providing a wide variety of specimens for the students to identify using previously provided field guides (*Plant Invaders of Mid-Atlantic Natural Areas*, *Native Trees of Virginia*, and *Common Native Shrubs and Woody Vines of Virginia*) along with specifically positioned clues. We, the student trainees, were encouraged to use any plant identification applications on our smart phones.

We eased into the activity through an initial reading of an article by Alexia Smith regarding the importance of native plants. Following that, Peggy attempted to quell nerves by telling us that there were “alot of plants to identify out there, so take baby steps”. She further advised us to use more than one source due to possible identification conflicts. Next, she, Jan, and Karen role played how to complete the template identification sheet by observing mystery plants placed on a table in front of the class.



Will Guild assists on PlantID with trainees, left to right, Jeff Davidson, Natalie Stevens, and Amira Walker



Kimberly Young (L) and Catlin Cyrus puzzle over plant ID

After that short exercise, the plant identification challenge began. Each table contained a mixture of native, non-native and invasive plants. We worked in teams of two or more, which proved more challenging than originally anticipated. When we could follow the dichotomous keys in the field guides, the task of plant identification was easy. However, when we did not reach satisfactory identifications through the guides, we resorted to using a phone application (such as Seek). Although the lab was not timed, we strove to work through most of the samples, reaching conclusions through either specific identification, jotting down identifying markings, or, when we were reaching the end of the lab, taking pictures of the plant to review when the answers were revealed at the end. I jotted down one particularly helpful book to procure for my reference: *Plant Identification Terminology: An Illustrated Glossary*, by James Harris and Melinda Harris (2001).

The three-hour lab ended with the class discussing the Alexia Smith article, noting the importance of biodiversity. Before leaving for the lab, participants received a boot scraper to use when working in a garden or hiking. The boot scrapers prevent transportation of invasive seeds from one area to another.

Lab assistants were Vera Winkler and Will Guild. Natalie Stevens participated as an Active Observer.

Lab #9 Veggie and Fruit Lab

By Kimberly Young

Under a canopy of peach, pear, and apple trees with rolls of thunder in the distance, the class of 2024 enjoyed a beautiful evening at the garden of Jim Kvach. Neatly lined rows of turnips, lettuces, squashes and more created an enviable backdrop for any home gardener. Add in the bountiful spread of garden snacks and you have the makings of a peaceful and memorable evening with fellow garden lovers. The class of 2024 along with several observers and helpers from previous years, had the opportunity to glean some knowledge from his successes and failures, laugh at funny crow stories, and gasp at stories of bears breaking into the garden. It was a night fit for theater.

Jim shared with the class his family story of gardening and the drive to get back to nature. With a long line of horticulturists in his lineage, it is no wonder his green thumb shines so brightly! Jim's green thumb does more than just grow beautiful produce, it helps to feed hundreds of Rockbridge residents through the local food bank, giving those who do not have access to fresh vegetables and fruits the opportunity to choose healthy alternatives in their diet.



The class learned about some of his favorite must have tools for the garden along with vegetable varieties that grow well for him in the clay soil of Rockbridge. Making his must have list were the action hoe and cape cod hoe which I can attest to! Alongside these wonderful hand tools was also a seed plow that makes his long, beautiful rows of tiny seeds a breeze to sow. What would take a hand sower 45 minutes to sow, he can do in just minutes! Tools aside, Jim also gave us a look at his favorite fertilizers, fencing options, and row covers. I will admit, my Amazon cart grew three sizes that day.

He discussed his journey in gardening in new terrain as he moved from Maryland and Ohio to the Rockbridge area and what he learned on gardening within our county. His advice to the Master Gardeners: build your soil, grow what you will eat and what your land enjoys growing, try new things, and most of all keep the crows away! If you have not had a chance to visit Jim's garden, here is your sign.

LAB # 10 Herbaceous Plants and Tree ID Lab

By Kimberly Young with photos by Shana Shutler

The RAMGA Class of 2024 participated in their final lab before graduation on June 15th! The setting could not have been more perfect with picturesque rock formations in the distance softened by the beautifully articulated gardens surrounding Faith and John Vosburgh's home. The class spent the first part of the evening strolling through the gardens learning about the plants that Faith and John have meticulously chosen throughout the past 20 years to create the beautiful cornucopia of nature surrounding their home.



The class spent time discussing and observing some of the over 150 species of trees now found on the Vosburgh's property that was once an open pastureland. Once the class was comfortable with the dichotomous key in the *Common Native Trees of Virginia* identification guide, they hit the gardens again on a little scavenger hunt to find and identify 20 different trees from a Big Leaf Magnolia in its stunning grandiose beauty to the elegant and aromatic white fir.

Throughout the lab, the trainees observed firsthand the elements of garden design as well as learning about the maintenance of perennials and annuals in the Rockbridge area. The evening ended with a "Green Elephant" activity in which the trainees selected a plant from Faith's garden to take home.

Lab assistants were Margaret Herman and Shana Shutler.

Active observers included Laurie Bassi and Ben Huger.

Master Gardener Profile

By Phyllis Fevrier

Will Guild is a Master Gardener who joined the class of 2023 having just moved here with his wife, Katie and 7-year-old son Liam. A retired Navy Master Chief Seal, Will has met a lot of challenges in his military career.

Below is a thumbnail sketch of his time at the Boxerwood Garden project:

Master Gardener Interns come in all shapes and sizes, personalities. Each comes with a variety of garden experiences and interest, and families. The comradery among the new members is heart-warming. Lasting relationships form throughout the membership. We all learn from each other and about each other. The bonding element is that we all love plants.

Occasionally, a Master Gardener joins us with life lessons to share.

At the Boxerwood Garden Project where I first worked with Will, he embraced the big concepts and worked hard to learn all the details of trees, pollinators, perennials, compost, and invasive species. As our group tackled an extreme invasive challenge, periwinkle (*Vinca major*) eradication, we spent many hours working together, but never quite finished ridding the area of the plant. Will met the task by coming back on his own time, with his son Liam to get the job done. The *Vinca* has not returned.

He tackled this new world of plants with kid-like zeal, high energy, and a sense of wonder. Going beyond the call of duty, he researched, made lists, and shared his newfound knowledge. As part of a Saturday volunteer group who helped install a detailed landscape plan, we all needed to learn about the native plants destined for the Boxerwood lodge bed. We had only botanical names to work with. Will quickly created a user-friendly list with both botanical and common plant names, so we could better understand the language challenge and learn.

Will sets the bar high, wanting to do more, dig deeper, and start new initiatives. He enrolled in the Extension Master Gardener Tree Stewardship program to learn more about tree care. He brought back to our group an urgency to rescue 50 pot-bound tree seedlings ASAP. We got the job done. With this kind of motivation, we all learn more. We do more.

Horticulture aside, the high bar of an ethical life that Will continues to set, is even more profound and rewarding if you're willing to listen. He acts in kindness and deep respect for all beings in the natural world. His patience, persistence, and courage shines as a role model for all. I have been touched by his ethics and sheer willingness to make our world a better place regardless of challenges. And, I am not alone.

Presently, we are watching Will face his newest challenge: a medical issue and the fight of his life. We are all rooting for him.

Read more about Will from a fellow Seal:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/free-kevin-stark-bcaze>



RAMGA SEED SAVERS

The Marigold Experiment: the Cat Ate My Homework

By Karen Lyons

During the propagation lab in February trainees were challenged to raise French marigolds (*Tagetes patula*) from seeds provided by the instructor (me) using 3 different planting methods: sowing inside, sowing in a milk jug outside, and directly sowing in the garden.

How did we do?

Six students were successful, and we were able to donate 20 plants to the plant sale on May 11th. Five students sadly reported that they were unsuccessful and six did not participate or failed to report their results. I also participated in this exercise and posted my experiences in the blog section of the RAMGA website.

The indoor gardeners sowed their seeds between 2/25 and 3/13, some using augmented light and some using light from the windowsill, most using a heat mat. The plants in milk jugs were sown between 2/24 and 3/8. Only one set of plants sown outside on 3/16 made it. As you might notice from the sample pictures below, the size of the plants varied between gardeners but were pretty similar between the different methods.



Grown outdoors



Grown in milk jugs



Grown inside

What were the pitfalls?

The cold and variable temperatures outside stunted germination and seedling growth even with frost protection methods. Some seeds planted inside perished when gardeners went on spring vacation and some likely fell victim to the family cat. The process of pricking out or potting up seedlings coincided with the most brown-thumb incidents.

What did we learn?

To successfully grow marketable plants by a specific date requires lots of planning and control of as many variables as possible. Despite the pitfalls, trainees reported an enjoyable learning experience.

ROCKBRIDGE MASTER GARDENERS IN THE COMMUNITY

Compost Coaches on the Job

By Phyllis Fevrier

The Compost Coaches attended five local farmers markets in June and July. There are eight active volunteers including several interns trained and ready to go. With hopes to expand, the Compost Coaches have been at both the Glasgow and Kerrs Creek Markets. A BIG thank you to Bob Kovach for printing a second Joy of Composting display, as an additional exhibit, and to Jen Coluzzi for professionally mounting it. We can now be in two places at once!

Contact Phyllis Fevrier, RAMGA Waste Reduction team leader, at 540-460-9298 if you'd like to volunteer on Saturdays with the Coaches. If you know of an appropriate event for the Compost Coaches to attend, also contact Phyllis.



CENTRAL ELEMENTARY

Story and Photos by Laurie Bassi

Central Elementary School is a recipient of a Rockbridge Area Master Gardener grant to create a school pollinator garden. The grant was used to purchase seeds, child-size garden gloves, trowels, and other gardening equipment. Working with the students, third through fifth grades, in the school's summer camp program, Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners demonstrated and monitored the planting of several hundred native plants which were donated by members of the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners. This was Master Gardening at its best.

Stay tuned for updates on RAMGA's two other grant recipients- Mountain View Elementary and Vet First.



Planting in action



From left to right: Margo Clegg, Debbie Desjardins, Cynthia Roberts

CELEBRATE ROCKBRIDGE



Jill Alvarado answers a gardening question

RAMGA was represented with a booth at a recent Rockbridge County event, Celebrate Rockbridge. Held at the Virginia Horse Center, RAMGA members interacted with the public to answer gardening questions and to share the Master Gardener mission. A big hit was the “Plants are Cool” give away bracelets for kids.



Margo Clegg (left) and Marybeth Sharkey (right) are ready to share their gardening knowledge

RAMGA PROGRAMS

RAMGA does not take a summer break when it comes to community programming. On June 15, MG Faith Vosburgh shared her knowledge of ornamental grasses at the Rockbridge Regional Library and July 15 found MG Mary Katherine Lawrence educating on the benefits of house plants at Grace Episcopal Church.

Both presentations ended with plants available for sale to those who attended.



CONTINUING EDUCATION

Take advantage of this hot weather, stay inside and watch some webinars to count towards your Continuing Education hours. Here are some suggestions, all ones I enjoy and follow to some extent.

Smithsonian “Let’s Talk Gardens” Webinar Series. There are dozens of interesting free webinars in this series, ranging the gamut from garden history to houseplants to native plants. There is even one on “Beer in the Garden” (the hop plant, of course). <https://gardens.si.edu/learn/lets-talk-gardens/>

Benjamin Vogt’s website www.PrairieUp.com has some great webinars and classes, mostly for a fee, but there are some free ones.

Margaret Roach’s blog and podcast, “A Way to Garden” is excellent, www.awaytogarden.com . Follow her articles in the NY Times, read her blog, sign up and receive her interviews with noted garden professionals every Sunday.

A plug for the American Horticultural Society. Their bi-monthly magazine, “The American Gardener” is excellent and your membership gets you in to over 380 botanical gardens and other horticultural destinations throughout North America for free, including Virginia’s own Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond. They also offer a series of fee-based (usually \$10 for members, \$15 for nonmembers) webinars called Lifelong Learning Educational Sessions by noted garden professionals. www.ahsgardening.org

National Garden Bureau’s, Great Garden Webinars, <https://ngb.org/great-garden-webinars/> .

And, of course, VA Tech's State Office webinars, <https://mastergardener.ext.vt.edu/webinar-archive/>



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