

Additional Details and Answers to Chat Questions

Elaine Mills, presenter of “Native Plants for Winter Interest”
10-25-2020

The majority of the plants described during this presentation are native to Arlington County and the City of Alexandria in Northern Virginia, and most of them are also indigenous to the Mid-Atlantic Region.

- Viewers from other areas of Virginia will want to look for regional native plant guides. Links to free PDF versions of these guides can be found on the website for the Virginia Native Plant Society at <https://vnps.org/virginia-native-plant-guides/>
- Viewers watching from other states may wish to consult county-level maps at <https://plants.sc.egov.usda.gov/java/> to confirm the presence of the plants in their regions. State native plant societies and local Extension offices should also be able to provide information on locally native species.

General Questions

- During the talk, an important question was raised about the advisability of **planting new tree and shrubs** this year when **periodic cicadas** will be emerging in mid-May to mid-June of 2021. Large established trees may become unsightly with flagging, the damage caused when female cicadas lay their eggs in small twigs and branches which then break and hang down. On the other hand, the growth of young trees and shrubs will be retarded from such damage, and they may even be killed if injury is extensive. The trees most susceptible to damage are oaks, maples, cherries and other fruit trees, hawthorns, and redbuds. Evergreens are rarely attacked.
- The advice in this [fact sheet](#) by the University of Maryland Extension is to **delay planting** into the fall of next year after the cicadas are gone.
- Read more details in a [Washington Post article](#) by garden columnist Adrian Higgins.
- To summarize the information on woody species which have separate male and female plants, here is a list of dioecious species:
 - American Holly (*Ilex opaca*)
 - Eastern Redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*)
 - Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*)
 - Southern Bayberry (*Morella* [was *Myrica*] *cerifera*)
 - Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)
 - Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*)
 - Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*) - match paired female and male cultivars (e.g. ‘Red Sprite’ and ‘Jim Dandy’ or ‘Winter Gold’ and ‘Southern Gentleman’)

- These are plants that are toxic to dogs:
 - Rhododendrons and azaleas
 - Hollies
 - Mountain Laurel
 - Burning bush, boxwood, privet
 - Nuts of nut trees, pits of fruit trees
 - Golden Ragwort
 - Carolina Jessamine

Questions on Trees

- With regard to **distinguishing between male and female trees**, it can be difficult to tell the difference at many nurseries. Native plant sellers may go to more effort to distinguish between plants of different sexes. It can be helpful to buy when plants are flowering (if flowers are significantly different) or when the female trees are in fruit.
- **Siting for serviceberry trees (*Amelanchier spp.*)** can be difficult because of the prevalence of cedar trees and groundcovers which are the alternate hosts for cedar-apple rust. For helpful information, see this [article on Gymnosporangium rusts](#) by the Wisconsin Horticulture Division of Extension.
- A question was raised about **Sugarberry**, a native tree being distributed by Arlington County, Virginia. This tree, alternately identified as *Celtis occidentalis* and *Celtis laevigata*, is common throughout VA. It is a fast-growing species that may eventually reach 50 to 70 feet tall with an equal spread of graceful, pendulous branches. It grows in sun to part shade in moist to wet soil and is resistant to urban pollution. 10 species of birds, including robins, mockingbirds, and other songbirds eat its sweet fruit. It is also the larval host for several butterflies, including the Hackberry Emperor, Mourning Cloak, Question Mark.
- Regarding the **placement of Sweetbay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)** in moderate shade under oaks, the tree can grow in sun to part shade. Just make certain soil moisture is maintained as the plant likes rich, acidic soil that is moist to wet.

Questions on Shrubs

- With regard to **siting witch hazel**, it is an understory species that can grow in shade to partial shade.
- In answer to a question on **witch hazel retaining its leaves**, the native eastern species (*Hamamelis virginiana*) that I described blooms from late fall into winter with yellow ribbon-like flowers once its fall foliage has dropped. *Hamamelis vernalis*, native to the Ozarks, blooms in late winter while retaining its leaves. Various cultivars and hybrids of non-native Japanese and Chinese witch hazels may also hold onto dead foliage all winter.

Native Plants for Winter Interest Addendum

- A number of the shrubs described in the talk have a **tendency to sucker**. This can be a desirable trait for creating a hedge, thicket, or screen. Gardeners who do not wish their shrubs to sucker, should prune them in the early spring to prevent their spread.
- With regard to **pruning shrubs to conform to HOA standards**, it is generally best to choose a plant with the principle of “Right Plant, Right Place.” This means selecting species that will not require constant maintenance to keep them within bounds. For detailed information on the subject, see the presentation on [“Overused Foundation Plants & Native Alternatives”](#).
- In this presentation, I featured **Southern Bayberry** (*Morella cerifera*), which is native to the Coastal Plain and Piedmont in Virginia from Fairfax County south. It is present through the coastal areas of the Southeast as far as Texas. This is a better choice than **Northern Bayberry** (*Morella pensylvanica*), which is native to only a few counties in coastal Virginia and is mostly found north along the coast through the Mid-Atlantic to Maine.
- A listener raised the question of why a **Red Twig Dogwood is not fruiting**. There could be a number of reasons for this:
 - In nature, Red Twig Dogwood is an understory shrub that grows in partial shade. Siting of plants in either dense shade or full sun can hinder flowering (and thus, fruiting) of *Cornus* species plants.
 - Drought can cause plants not to bloom and fruit.
 - If the shrub has been pruned to remove older brown branches, it may put most of its energy into developing new branches and leaves rather than flowering. Late pruning of live branches will remove the next season’s flower buds.
 - Finally, use of high-nitrogen lawn fertilizers within the dripline of a shrub may promote rapid vegetative growth. Organic mulch provides a slow-release fertilizer that feeds a shrub without reducing flower production.
- Despite its preference for hot temperatures and full sun exposure, **Common Yucca** can thrive under a variety of conditions, including poor soil and full shade.
- **Dwarf Fothergilla** (*Fothergilla gardenii*) was not mentioned as it is native to coastal areas further south from North Carolina to Florida. I am not certain whether it would be a **substitute for azaleas**. While both plants prefer acidic soil, Fothergilla flowers most prolifically and has the most colorful fall foliage in a sunny location, while azaleas are suitable for partial shade conditions with morning sun and afternoon shade.
- When a question arose about using cultivars, I mentioned that while the ‘**Annabelle**’ **cultivar of Wild Hydrangea** (*Hydrangea arborescens*) is ornamentally attractive, its showy flowers are sterile and won’t provide the nectar and pollen of the straight species.

Question on Vines

- A question arose about any **aggressive tendencies** of the three native vines discussed. Cross-vine can spread rapidly by root suckers, so planting it in a container could be a way to control its expansion.

Question on Perennials

- I explained that it is best to plant the **straight species of Purple Coneflower** (*Echinacea purpurea*) in order to provide nectar and pollen for pollinators. There are more than 100 cultivars of this plant with different colors and shapes of blossoms. Some, such as 'Green Jewel,' have colors that are much less visible to pollinators. Others, such as double-flowered 'Pink Double Delight,' are sterile; they don't produce pollen and their nectar is inaccessible because of the reduction of the large central cone of the straight species.

Question on Ground Covers

- Most of the **ground covers** presented **spread slowly** via rhizomes or stolons. Lyreleaf Sage, Foxglove Beardtongue, and Golden Ragwort are the most likely to spread to a wider area if their flowers are allowed to go to seed. They can be controlled by clipping the flower stalks. All three are found naturally in woodland areas and their spread is not deemed "invasive" (That term is reserved for non-native plants whose uncontrolled spread causes ecological harm.) so it should not be a problem to use them in a garden that borders woodlands.

Question on Ferns

- The only **fern** I mentioned as being **edible** is Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), and it is only the young fiddleheads, harvested before they unfurl, which are edible when cooked. Some foraging websites mention other species, but scholarly articles raise questions about their toxicity or carcinogenic properties.

Questions on Grasses

- On the question of **native turf grasses**, the one I hear the most about is Buffalo Grass (*Bouteloua dactyloides*) which is indigenous to the shortgrass prairie. It is a fine-textured, warm-season grass, measuring about 10 to 12 inches tall, but draping to a shorter height. It forms a dense sod in sun and dry soil, is tolerant of heat and drought, and requires no fertilization. It can be mowed to a height of 2 to 3 inches several times a year or left as is for a natural look. (See discussion and photos around 1:02:00 of my presentation [on "Native Grasses, Sedges & Rushes for the Home Landscape."](#))
- It is true that **seeds blowing** from a grass like River Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) can spread somewhat through a garden, even when grown in a container. The container will at least restrict the vegetative spread.

- A possible grass-like **ground cover for box turtles** to traverse in shade would be Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*). The leaf blades of that sedge are soft and fine-textured, and it will do well in dry shade where grass won't grow. The plants will spread slowly to fill an area, but they won't be able to take regular human foot traffic. Steppingstones could be used to create a path for pedestrians. Native plants that are appealing to the turtles are Wild Violets (*Viola* spp.) for flowers and leaves and Mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*) for the fruit.
- **Little Bluestem** (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) is native to the tallgrass prairies where it grows in sunny, dry conditions with infertile soil. Plants will grow taller and be more prone to **flopping** in gardens with rich soils or if they are planted in shade. Watering and fertilization will also promote flopping. Lately, we have also been dealing with heavy rain in extreme weather events that can beat the grass down. Some cultivars, such as 'Standing Ovation' are said to retain their upright habit through the growing season.