

Elaine Mills, presenter of Caring for Your Native Plants Garden

In response to questions on altering soil pH, soil tests, and purchasing soil:

- It is a lengthy process of several years to change soil pH, and most alkaline soils (those with high pH, above 7.0) cannot be made acidic permanently by any practical means.
- As explained in the presentation it is best to follow the Master Gardener mantra of “Right Plant, Right Place” and to select plants that fit your garden’s conditions with regard to soil pH rather than to attempt to change the soil. (See this [resource from the handout](#) for indications of preferred pH of many native plants.)
- Soil can vary in different sections of your yard, so it’s a good idea to do a separate test for each area you are considering planting. This [video](#) describes the process and how to handle the related paperwork.
- If you are growing plants directly in your garden, you won’t need to buy any soil. If you decide to try growing native plants in containers, see special considerations under [Captivating Containers with Native Plants](#).

Regarding the division of perennials:

- That propagation task can be undertaken in “early spring,” meaning March, weather and soil temperature permitting. See the resource [Dividing Native Perennials](#) for specific details on each plant.
- Astilbe is not a native plant, so you won’t see it on the plant list. That plant needs division every 3 to 4 years, and it can be divided in either the fall or early spring.

There was a question regarding damage by rabbits.

- Rabbits generally cause more harm to young and newly planted shrubs than to mature shrubs. While using chicken wire cages around these shrubs is not particularly attractive, it can help shrubs reach a sufficient size to avoid predation.
- Some gardeners use blood meal and garlic-based products as repellents.
- See the class on [Managing Wildlife in the Urban Home Landscape](#) for more suggestions on dealing with rabbits as well as deer.

On the question of finding plants of the proper sex in dioecious species:

- See the [Winterberry Pollination Chart](#) for matched male and female cultivars of *Ilex verticillata*.
- For inkberry (*Ilex glabra*), the environmental horticulturist at EcoBeneficial states that the only confirmed male cultivar is ‘Pretty Boy.’ While *Ilex glabra* ‘Nordic’ is often listed as a male, it is actually a female, as are ‘Shamrock,’ ‘Compacta,’ ‘Nigra,’ ‘Densa,’ and ‘Cape Cod.’ I am lucky to have a straight species male that I purchased from a native-only nursery which pollinates my dwarf females.
- A participant suggests pruning and rooting suckers from suckering shrubs, such as Winterberry, to get gender-specific new plants.

Regarding cultivars of **shrubs with altered leaf color**:

- The **seeds** of these plants can easily revert back to produce foliage of the straight species.
- **Individual branches** of shrub cultivars may revert back to the original color foliage. The process of reversion occurs fairly frequently with the ‘Diabolo’ cultivar of Common Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*). My colleague Maraëa Harris, a certified arborist, says, “I think letting it revert all by itself could be possible, but often it’s just a branch that reverts that can be cut back. I think if someone wanted the straight species, it would be easier to just get that one rather than waiting for a cultivar to revert.” In an exchange on the Dave’s Garden website, some gardeners attributed reversion of the plant in their gardens to lack of sunlight.
- I am not aware of any problems with the **blue green or chartreuse** foliage affecting a plant’s use as food for the caterpillars of butterflies and moths. Plaintain-leaved Sedge (*Carex plantaginea*) and Blue Wood Sedge (*Carex flaccosperma*) are examples of plants with these colors of foliage that serve as host plants for skipper and Satyr butterflies.
- On the question of whether a plant with **intense blue foliage**, such as ‘Blue Shadow’ would support wildlife, it doesn’t seem that Fothergilla is a preferred host plant species. If the flowers are the same as the straight species *Fothergilla gardenii* (not *gardenia*), pollinators would still use it as an early-season nectar plant.
- Incidentally, ‘Blue Shadow’ is not a cultivar (a modification of a species) but a hybrid cross (*Fothergilla x intermedia* ‘Blue Shadow’) between two native species (*F. major* and *F. gardenii*). Hybrids are even more removed from straight species than cultivars.

Here is some clarification of my comments on deadheading:

- Deadheading (removal of spent flowers) during the summer will prompt reblooming in some perennial species (See slide 56 of PDF and [Cutting Back and Deadheading Native Perennials](#)).
- Deadheading is done after bloom for other species that won't rebloom, such as hibiscus and iris, to remove unsightly shriveled flowers and/or stalks for a neater appearance.
- In the fall, you can make the decision to retain seedheads for use by wildlife, or you can cut them back if you don't want the plants to self-seed and spread.
- In my garden, I deadhead some plants selectively. For example, I retain seedheads for Sundrops (*Oenothera fruticosa*) in the back part of my garden, but I cut off straggling stems from the plants that are near my front sidewalk to show off their evergreen basal leaves as a ground cover and provide a neater appearance for passersby.

For a discussion of climate change impacts on gardening:

- Please see the recording of my talk on [“Climate-Conscious Gardening”](#) in which my co-presenter Elizabeth Collaton and I present five categories of practical actions homeowners can take in their own backyards to either mitigate or adapt to climate change.
- You can also read the [monthly series of articles](#) I wrote to get more details on specific sub-topics and see a handy climate-conscious gardening checklist.
- As far as the issue of phenology (the timing of natural events), influenced by climate change, the winter season seems to be the most problematic with the line between winter and spring blurring and resulting in a mismatch between the blooming of spring plants, the emergence of bees, the maturing of caterpillars, and the arrival of migrating birds. For an enlightening discussion, which specifically presents data on what's happening locally, see the recording of a great talk by Clare Walker on [“Wildlife, Phenology & Climate Change: It's all about timing.”](#)
- I imagine the earlier flowering of certain shrubs may mean that those which bloom on “new wood” and are pruned during the colder months will need to be pruned somewhat earlier. In our Glencarlyn demonstration garden, we already prune those shrubs early in the season. The photo of Master Gardeners pruning a Red Twig Dogwood was taken in early March.

In response to a question about pollinator-friendly solutions for diseases like Powdery Mildew and insect damage:

- Site plants appropriately to avoid problems.
- Employ cultural techniques, such as spacing or thinning plants for better air circulation, watering in the morning and avoiding sprinklers, mulching roots of plants to keep them cool in summer heat and to prevent splashing up of fungal spores.
- Encourage insect predators, such as wasps and ladybeetles, and learn to tolerate a bit of cosmetic damage until predators can control the pests.
- Remove diseased foliage, if diseases occur, to prevent spread.

After seeing a question in the chat on pruning Coral Honeysuckle, I realized that the one plant category I did not discuss in this presentation was vines.

- I have now created a new chart on [Care of Native Vines](#) which appears on the page for the class along with the other resources.
- See also the recording of my class on [“Native Vines for the Home Garden”](#) as well as the [Additional Information & Answers to Chat Box Questions](#) which has links to excellent resources on training and pruning of vines.

To provide further detail on handling fall leaves:

- The more fall leaves are left in place the better, but in some areas that may not be possible. For example, I allow all the leaves that fall in the forested area of mt backyard to overwinter in place. This is beneficial for the soil, the trees that will take up the recycled nutrients, and larval or hibernating stages of insects.
- I sweep blown leaves from my deck and pathways and do one of several things.
 - Add the leaves to the nearby forested section of my yard. They are much deeper here than elsewhere in the yard.
 - Add them to a storage bin for the “brown”/carbon component of my compost.
 - Shred them slightly to use as mulch (about 2-3 inches deep) around my shrubs and perennials. This reduces the volume, making them easier to spread and less likely to blow away. Since the leaves didn’t fall beneath the trees, I am less likely to be destroying any insects in the process. Shredding is better than total removal.

- Take care when using leaves around perennials so that you don't smother basal rosettes which could rot out.
- If I had a lawn, I would either sweep the leaves from there or run a mower over them to provide nutrients.
- Some leaves, such as magnolia leaves, are very leathery and slow to break down. I don't have any, but I would probably shred them to speed up decomposition.
- The idea is to keep this valuable resource on your property as much as possible, realizing that different gardeners have varying priorities and different garden situations that may necessitate flexibility.
- See [Leave the Leaves](#) for a thorough discussion of all of these points.

On the question of when to mulch:

- Spring could be a good time to mulch after you've weeded your beds and perennials have emerged.
- Be sure it has rained recently, or water plants and soil before mulching to help keep roots cool and retain moisture into the summer months.
- Adding some leaves to the bed in the fall, refreshes this protective layer.

On the question of how to educate neighbors:

- Our Volunteer Coordinator suggests that you can gently educate neighbors who are using non-sustainable garden practices by pointing out to them that it can be easier and less expensive to do the "right" thing (e.g., saving money by not needlessly fertilizing, saving energy by only watering when necessary.)
- Maybe you could invite them for a tour of your garden or refreshments on your patio and a friendly, non-confrontational discussion, especially if their negative practices are affecting you and the health of your garden and insect visitors. If neighbors see how attractive your garden is up close, it may have an effect on their approach.
- Some folks share produce or flowers with neighbors and explain how they are produced without pesticides.

"**Cues to Care**" refers to gardening techniques that can be used to make gardens with native plant more acceptable to those who are used to the default landscape of lawn, one shade tree, and foundation plants. I devote a whole section of my presentation on ["Creating a Well-Layered Landscape"](#) (starting at 54:00) to this topic.

Additional helpful suggestions were provided by attendees:

- Although generally considered to be a weed, Purple Deadnettle is edible with vitamin benefits.
- Root slayer shovel is a good tool for digging grasses.
- The propagating beds of the Virginia Native Plant Society at Green Spring Gardens and Lowe's accept plastic pots to recycle.
- Participants had several recommendations on successfully starting native perennials from seed:
 - [How to Prepare Seeds for Sowing](#), Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center
 - [Seed Germination Database](#), Tom Clothier (not just native species)
 - [All the Dirt on Winter Sowing](#), University of Maryland Extension
 - Growing native plants from seed is easier when starting early enough to cold stratify.

Some native species, such as Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), Spotted Beebalm (*Monarda punctata*), and Wild Bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*) don't require cold stratification