

WINTER

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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GRASSES, SEDGES, AND RUSHES — OUR GRAMINOIDS



© Rochelle Bartolomei

BY ALAN FORD

Winter leads to Spring and soon enough we will all be eager to venture out to see what is sprouting. For now, we can explore using our minds and books. A group of our members took the opportunity last year to come together to learn more about grasses, sedges and rushes — to get beyond “sedges have edges, rushes are round, grasses have leaves that go all the way down.” We met many times in the field and in our homes to pore over the keys in *The Flora of Virginia*, to wrestle with botanic terminology, to examine samples with hand lens or microscope. In August and again in October, we led members and guests on a walk focusing on graminoids and were heartened to find others interested in our hard-won identifications. With this success, we decided to continue our work into the new year, and call in some experts to help us on our way. As you can see, the talks scheduled for the Winter will provide expert commentary and insight into some aspects of this varied and expansive domain.

These species are all monocots in the order Poales. They can be annual or perennial. They grow throughout our region in habitats from tidal marshes to dry upland forests and balds. They all flower, and some of those flowers are surprisingly colorful for wind-pollinated plants. Everyone agrees that graminoids can be difficult to differentiate, with identification resting on a detail of the flower or seed. But there are also many “student’s friends” that can be recognized by some easy-to-see characteristic. Our rallying cry is “Know more grasses!” But when faced with an unknown graminoid, that changes to “We require an inflorescence!”



© DNR-DNH, Gary Fleming

Please join us this Winter in exploring Virginia’s Poales.

Upcoming Events

January

Grasses in VA Plant Communities
Thursday, Jan. 9, 7:30—9:00 pm
Charles Smith, Fairfax County Park Authority Naturalist and VNPS member, will kick off the new year with his take on the role of grasses and sedges in their plant communities.

February

Grasses in the Coastal Plain
Thursday, Feb. 13, 7:30—9:00 pm
Helen Hamilton, VNPS member, naturalist, and author will discuss her new book *Wildflowers & Grasses of Virginia's Coastal Plain*. This special habitat has required many fascinating adaptations in the plant community.

March

Invasive Grasses in Virginia
Thursday, Mar. 13, 7:30—9:00 pm
Kevin Heffernan, Stewardship Biologist with Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, will speak on existing and new threats such as Wavyleaf Basketgrass.

*All events are free
and open to the public.
Meet at Green Spring Gardens.*

MY FAVORITE GRAMINOID

(Graminoid: grasslike plant. Here meaning grasses, sedges and rushes)

Little Bluestem -- *Schizachyrium scoparium*

by Donna Murphy

I like all things blue. Little bluestem is a fine-textured bunch grass that ranges in color from blue-green in late summer to an interesting bronze in the fall with cotton-tufted seed heads that persist in winter. It prefers dry conditions on a variety of substrates and soils and is found throughout Virginia growing naturally in the partial shade of open forests and woodlands or in full sun in fields, meadows and roadsides. Although drought tolerant, it may die back during extended drought, but it flowers well



© Ann Wing

during years with at least 20 inches of rainfall. Its documented height ranges from one foot to over six feet with a usual average of between 18 inches and three feet.

The genus name, *Schizachyrium*, comes from the Greek words schizo, to split, and achyron, chaff; the species name, *scoparium*, comes from the Greek word scopa, meaning broom-like; an apt descriptor of the plant in bloom. It is one of the big four prairie grasses that at one time dominated the prairies of the American plains, according to *The Tallgrass Restoration Manual of the Native Prairies* (along with big bluestem, *Andropogon gerardii*; Indian grass, *Sorghastrum nutans*; and Switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*.)

Little bluestem readily reseeds and may not be suitable for a small garden; however, its benefits are many. It is considered good forage for grazing animals, and yet it is highly resistant to deer. It offers cover and nesting materials for birds, small mammals and native bees and seeds in winter for small mammals and birds. In addition, it is a larval host to numerous skippers: Ottoe, Indian, Crossline, Dusted, Dixie and Cobweb. These benefits are best realized if the grass covers a large area, but even if contained in a small space, several plants together can offer the beauty and visual interest of an accent plant.

Broomsedge – *Andropogon virginicus* var. *virginicus*

by Margaret Chatham

Growing up in New Jersey, I had to know what that lovely red grass sticking up out of the snow in the field across the street was. The first book that identified it for me called it “poverty grass.” From a farmer’s point of view, that’s a fair name: it grows on nutrient-poor or dry soil, and provides poor winter grazing. But a naturalist sees it as a good early-succession plant: deep-rooted to prevent erosion, providing cover, nesting material, and seed for wildlife to eat. Identifying it when its two- to three-and-a-half-foot reddish culms are not present is difficult. Once they grow up in September or so, a sure way to tell it from superficially similar little bluestem is that its culms are flattened or lenticular in cross-section, while little bluestem’s culms are round.

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MY FAVORITE GRAMINOID (CONTINUED)

Purple Lovegrass – *Eragrostis spectabilis*

by Rochelle Bartolomei

Eragrostis spectabilis (See front cover for photo) is a gorgeous warm season perennial grass that thrives in dry sun and barren soil, often with gravel or sand. This bunchgrass grows about a foot tall, and the loose, open panicle grows up to 18" long and 12" across, showing off above the 10" leaf blades. These beautiful purple panicles give this grass its common name and characteristic purple haze when growing in a mass. Purple love grass is common throughout the region, often found in fields and disturbed areas. It is an excellent grass for roadsides and erosion control due to a 30" root depth and tolerance of salt and drought. In the garden, it makes a spectacular edging and is particularly beautiful in late summer with the sun shining throughout the seed heads. The panicles can break off and act like tumbleweed, spreading seeds as they go, but it also spreads rhizomatically.

Plumegrass - *Saccharum brevibarbe* var. *contortum* and *Saccharum giganteum*

by Gaylan Meyer

When the Grass Bunch conducted a training walk for the FCPA folks at Wakefield in August, Charles Smith asked whether we had found the "Saccharum". Unfortunately, we had not but there was a candidate that looked a little like Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) which had not yet developed enough to be identifiable. A month or so later, the inflorescence finally matured enough that we could identify it as *Saccharum brevibarbe* var. *contortum*, spiral-awned plumegrass or short-beard plumegrass. This tall (8-30 dm), stout, reed-like grass is characterized by brownish/purplish inflorescence "plumes" in large panicles (12-55 x 3-10 cm). It has callus hairs (the hairs at the base of the spikelet) from ½ as long to nearly as long as the spikelet; lemma awns 10-22mm flattened at the base so that they sometimes spiral, and smooth stems except sometimes slightly bearded at the nodes (hence the name short-beard plumegrass).



© Gaylan Meyer

Fresh from our study of Wakefield's plumegrass, we discovered another *Saccharum* at Huntley Meadows. This one was a little taller (up to 4 m) with larger (15-60 x 6-15 cm) tawny/purplish panicles. It is appropriately named *Saccharum giganteum*, giant plumegrass or sugarcane plumegrass. It has callus hairs equal to or longer than the spikelet, non-spiraled awns 1-3 cm, and usually bearded nodes. Both species are native to our region and sometimes used in landscapes as ornamental grasses.

Indian Grass – *Sorghastrum nutans*

by Margaret Chatham

Does anyone remember when the VNPS propagation committee tried to grow a small demonstration meadow at Green Spring? We ended up demonstrating that growing a meadow is trickier than it looks, but the vision of loose tufts of Indian grass soaring above even the tallest New York ironweed, blooming in September with yellow anthers dangling from its plumes ("nutans" means nodding) remains in my mind, and I welcome it every September wherever I find it. *The Flora of Virginia* says it only gets 5-26 dm tall; it always surprises me to find Indian grass shorter than I am after that first introduction to some that towered.



© Margaret Chatham

Whatever their height, Indian grass culms are stiffer than most grasses. There is a second, more delicate and infrequent species around, *S. elliotti*, or slender Indian grass. The two can be distinguished by their awns: *S. nutans* has awns 1-3 cm long with one bend in them; *S. elliotti* has awns 1.6-4.6 cm long with two bends.

WINTER WEEDING – RESCUING THE FOREST, ENJOYING THE TREES

By Margaret Chatham

Traditionally, winter is the time to sit by the fire & dream over seed catalogs and garden books. But there are those odd, warm days when you just can't stay inside – but what is there to do in the yard or park? Well, wander out & see what shows itself: any plant that is green this time of year is worth a second look. Many invasive exotic plants get part of their advantage over natives by using winter sunshine. Is that bit of green among the dry leaves a treasured native evergreen like partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*), or a dreaded invasive exotic like garlic mustard (*Alliaria petiolata*)? If the latter, now is the ideal time to pull it out.

In the winter, you can fit hundreds of small basal rosettes into one regular plastic grocery bag, the same plants that would fill a large trash bag & be a heavy load to get out of the woods if you wait till they bolt & bloom. Feel for the bend in the stiff white root right around ground level, smell the garlic odor, even take a taste of a leaf & you'll soon feel confident at identifying garlic mustard at this stage.

English ivy (*Hedera helix* or *H. hibernica*), wintercreeper (*Euonymus fortunei*), Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonicus*), and multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) are all easy to spot in the winter, and perhaps easier to tackle when most desirable plants are dormant.



© Margaret Chatham

And then there's my favorite winter target: Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*). It isn't evergreen, but large plants often have red fruits to catch your eye. It's sharply thorny, so pulling it when you can wear heavy winter clothes is helpful. And since one of the reasons for wanting to rid the forests of it is to reduce the concentration of disease bearing ticks, working on it when the ticks are less active is also an advantage.

There will be 12 workdays to attack the barberry population of The Nature Conservancy's Fraser Preserve located in Great Falls in January & February, all workdays are from 12-3 pm: Sat, Jan 4; Wed, Jan 8; Sun, Jan 12; Sat, Jan 18; Sun, Jan 19; Wed, Jan 22; Sat, Feb 1; Wed, Feb 5; Sun, Feb 9; Sat, Feb 15; Wed, Feb 19; Sun, Feb

23. If you would like to come out for some purposeful winter exercise, please email margaret.chatham@verizon.net.

In addition to Fraser Preserve two other sites are being targeted this Winter. Marie Butler Leven Preserve, in McLean, is designated as a Native Plant Arboretum. This park has great potential and many challenges. Earth Sangha is working to bring this project to fruition and Alan Ford is one of the onsite leaders focusing on invasive control. He will be leading workdays alternate Sundays throughout the Winter. Matt Bright will be leading workdays on Wednesdays. Please visit www.earthsangha.org or contact Alan at: amford@acm.org.

Finally, Salona Meadows, also in McLean, is a 40 acre parcel currently under conservation easement with the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust. As part of their regular and ongoing property oversight efforts Alan Ford is leading invasive control workdays on alternate Saturdays through the Winter. Please visit www.nvct.org or contact Alan at amford@acm.org.

Please consider joining us at any of these events to enjoy the Winter sunshine and do something good for the forest.



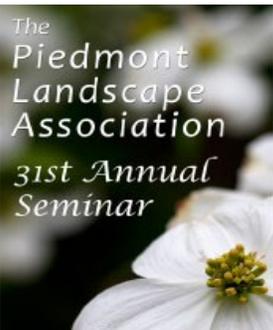
Alan dressed to kill Barberry.

DR. DOUG TALLAMY

Bringing Nature Home with Doug Tallamy

Sunday February 16, 2014, 2:00 p.m. — Manassas Park Community Center, Manassas Park, VA

Prince William Wildflower Society with the support of the Prince William Master Gardeners are sponsoring a lecture by Doug Tallamy, author of *Bringing Nature Home* for which he won the Silver Medal from the Garden Writer's Association. He will discuss the important ecological roles of the plants in our landscapes, emphasize the benefits of designing gardens with these roles in mind, and explore the consequences of failing to do so. You may also be interested in his website, www.PlantANative.com. General public is welcome. Refreshments will be served. No admission charge, but reservations are strongly encouraged. Call the Extension Office at (703) 792-7747 or email your name and daytime phone number to: master_gardener@pwcgov.org. For more information please visit: vnps.org/wp/pwws, call Nancy Vehrs at (703) 368-2898, or find us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/VirginiaNativePlantSociety.



Piedmont Landscape Association 31st Annual Seminar

Thursday, Feb 20, 2014, all day — Paramount Theater, Charlottesville, VA

This year's speakers include: Rick Darke: "The Layered Landscape"; Doug Tallamy: "Let It Be An Oak" and "Why We Need More Natives in Our Landscapes"; Sandy McDougale: "Tough Perennials I Haven't Killed (Yet) and Promising New Victims". For more information, please visit: www.piedmontlandscape.org/seminar.html. Early bird registration ends 1/17/14 (currently \$60; or \$52 for seniors, students, & members of Jefferson Chapter of VNPS).

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

Falls Church Habitat Restoration Team

Help restore the local ecosystem in city parks.

Remove invasives and plant natives that will then benefit local birds and butterflies. For more information contact Melissa Teates at 703-538-6961 or melanite@verizon.net



Reston Association's Habitat Heroes Program

Help restore local wildlife habitat through invasive plant removal and replanting with native plants. For more information contact Ha Brock at 703-435-7986 or ha@reston.org



Arlington County's Remove Invasive Plants (RiP) Program

Help rescue Arlington parks from alien plant invaders! Bring your own tools. For more information contact Sarah Archer at 703-228-1862 or sarcher@arlingtonva.us



Fairfax County's Invasive Management Area (IMA) Program

Help remove invasive plants and learn about new species. For more information contact Erin Stocksclaeder at 703-324-8681 or erin.stocksclaeder@fairfaxcounty.gov





POTOWMACK CHAPTER WINTER WALKS

ALL CHAPTER PROGRAMS AND WALKS
ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

PLEASE CHECK OUR FACEBOOK PAGE AND YAHOO LIST SERVE
FOR THE MOST UP-TO-DATE INFORMATION ABOUT ALL PROGRAMS.

January 26, 1:00—3:00 p.m.
The Trees of Barcroft Park in Winter
Barcroft Park, Arlington, VA

Jim Hurley, Arlington Regional Master Naturalist and VNPS member will lead a Winter Tree ID walk in Barcroft Park. Registration required at vnps20140126.eventbrite.com.

February — exact date & time TBA
Winter Tree ID
Location TBA

Emily Southgate, VNPS member, will lead a Winter Tree ID walk in Barcroft Park. Registration will be required. More details to come.

April 12
Spring in the Potomac Gorge
Turkey Run Park, McLean, VA

Join chapter Botany Chair Cris Fleming for a walk through one of our area's best spring wildflower displays. Space is limited. RSVP will be required. More details to come.

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