

# Blue Ridge Wildflower Society

A CHAPTER OF THE  
VIRGINIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

Vol. 23, No. 1

February, 2006

## Calendar of Events

- March 11** **Randolph-Macon Woman's College Botanic Garden Work Day.** Meet at the Garden at 2:00, we will clean the winter debris and prepare for spring. Bring work tools if possible. See the Lynchburg Area Members column for additional information.
- March 11** **VNPS Annual Winter Workshop at the University of Richmond,** 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m. Details and a registration form will be in the next VNPS Bulletin.
- March 25** **Wildflower Walk at Arcadia.** Meet at 10:00 a.m. in the parking lot just past the bridge over Jennings Creek on Route 614. Bring your lunch. Rich Crites, Leader, 540-774-4518.
- March 27** **General Membership Meeting,** 7:00 p.m., Roanoke Church of Christ.
- April 15** **Roaring Run Wildflower Walk.** Meet at 9:30 a.m. at the Daleville Park & Ride to carpool to Roaring Run. Cindy Burks, leader, 540-977-0868.
- April 22** **Buffalo Creek Nature Center Wildflower Walk.** Meet at 2:00 p.m. in the visitor parking lot at the Nature Center. This is on Route 24 about 2 miles east of the Bedford/Campbell County Line. Buffalo Creek is one of the sites on our VNPS Registry. Expect to see a good variety of ephemerals. Sandra Elder, leader, 434-525-8433.
- April 24** **Wildflower Walk/General Membership Meeting.** Meet at 6:00 p.m. at the Roanoke River Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway. If raining, meet at the Roanoke Church of Christ at 7:00 for an indoor program. Rich Crites will be our leader/speaker, 540-774-4518.
- April 29** **Wildflower Walk at the home of Malcolm Black at Bent Mountain.** Meet at 11:00 a.m. at Bent Mountain Elementary School. Bring your lunch.
- May 6** **Twenty-second Annual Spring Wildflower Sale,** 9:00 - Noon, Community Arboretum at Virginia Western Community College. No plants may be selected or sold prior to 9:00. If you need pots, contact Paul Cowins, 434-239-4842, or Cindy Burks, 540-977-0868.
- May 13** **Blue Ridge Parkway South.** Meet at 10:00 a.m. at Buck Mountain Overlook, Blue Ridge Parkway milepost 123.2. Bring your lunch although we may decide to eat at Tuggle's Gap Restaurant. Rich Crites, 540-774-4518, or Butch Kelly, 540-384-7429, leaders.
- May 20** **Wildflower Walk and Wildflower Gardening Demonstration.** Meet at 11:00 a.m. at the James River Visitor Center, Blue Ridge Parkway, for a short walk or at Noon for lunch. Bring your lunch or eat at Otter Creek Restaurant. At 1:00 p.m. we will carpool to the Cowins farm for the demonstration. Paul & Lucille Cowins, 434-229-4884, leaders. This takes the place of our May General Membership Meeting.
- June 3** **Blue Ridge Parkway North.** Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Peaks of Otter Lodge for breakfast before the walk or meet at 10:00 a.m. at the Peaks of Otter Visitor Center for the walk. Rich Crites, leader, 540-774-4518.
- June 17** **Rosebay Rhododendron Registry Site Walk at Altavista.** Meet at 2:00 p.m. in the parking lot of Ross Laboratories in Altavista. From Roanoke, take Route 460 Bypass to the Route 29 South, Danville, exit (near the Lynchburg airport). Take the first exit and turn left at the end of the ramp which will take you to Altavista. Ross Labs has a large sign and is by the railroad. Sandra Elder, 434-525-8433, leader.
- August 20** **Picnic with the Cowins.** Our annual BRWS picnic will be at the Cowins farm near Big Island. Plan to come any time after 2:00 p.m. We will eat around 4:00-5:00. Directions will be provided with the July Newsletter. There will be a Board of Directors meeting at 2:00 p.m.



## President's Letter

Cindy Burks

Spring is coming! I hope you will join us at our meetings and other spring activities. Much of this winter has seemed more like spring than winter. If, like me, you wonder what the effect will be on wildflowers, shrubs and trees, we will find out beginning with our field trip on March 25th to Arcadia. Field trips to Arcadia have previously offered a smorgasbord of wildflowers, including birdsfoot violets, trailing arbutus, trout lilies, spice bush and more. Rich Crites will be the leader for this field trip. Rich always shares so much information about the plants that I hate for his field trips to end. They whet my appetite for more time outdoors and help me better appreciate what I see when I'm outdoors.

We will add a meeting in April this year, in lieu of the usual May meeting. On April 24 we will meet at 6:00 PM at the Roanoke River Overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway and include a field trip in that area and at Mill Mountain. (In case of rain, we will meet at 7:00 PM at the Roanoke Church of Christ.)

We have arranged a special event for May 20th. We will meet at 11:00 AM at the James River Visitor Center on the Blue Ridge Parkway (near the intersection with Hwy. 501 near Big Island) and have a short wildflower walk, followed by lunch. You may bring your own lunch and picnic at that area or have lunch at Otter Creek Restaurant. At 1:00 PM we will carpool to Paul and Lucille Cowins' farm for a wildflower gardening demonstration. Paul and Lucille are major plant contributors for our spring and fall plant sales. Their plants are always magnificent! I hope to learn some of their techniques.

Our spring plant sale will be held the first Saturday in May at the parking lot near the Virginia Western Community College Arboretum. Each year BRWS members share plants from their own gardens. Plant varieties vary from year to year. With the unusual weather we've had, it will be interesting to see what plants are available this year. Proceeds from the plant sale go towards scholarships for biology/

botany/horticulture students.

In the fall, we will be electing new officers. For over 20 years, faithful members have stepped up to the task of keeping our organization together and running smoothly. If you might be interested in helping the Blue Ridge Wildflower Society as an officer, please let me know. Arrangements can be made for you to meet with current officers to learn more about the duties of each office. We really need your support to keeping BRWS going.

## The Hazel Alder

Among the earliest of winter-blooming plants, often found before even Skunk Cabbage, is the Smooth or Hazel Alder shrub, *Alnus serrulata*. Alders are a genus of the *Betulaceae* or Birch family which contains about 100 species of trees and shrubs. In addition to Birches and Alders, the Hazels, Hornbeams and Hop Hornbeams are all represented by native species.

This shrub, also called the Tag Alder, normally grows 6 to 12 feet tall and has one to two inch trunks. It may also take the form of a small tree and have a single trunk up to four inches in diameter and a height of 24 feet. Only about six species of *Alnus* routinely reach tree size.

The bark is dark and generally uniformly or smoothly colored (hence the name Smooth). There may, however, be some speckling with white bar-like markings similar to those of Speckled Alder, *A. rugosa*. The twig bark may range from hairless to moderately hairy – a characteristic shared by many alders. The reddish buds are stalked.

Most of the alternate leaves are elliptical or oblong with pointed tips and narrow bases. They are two to four inches long and the undersurface may be smooth or velvety but will consistently be prominently veined; they are held erect, not pendent. Leaf margins are shallowly and irregularly toothed, producing a wavy appearance. As is typical of alders in what appears to be an effort to keep us guessing,

any branch may have a variety of leaf sizes and shapes.

Before the leaves appear in spring, the plants will flower, producing both staminate, or male, and pistillate, or female, flowers in separate inflorescences. As with most *Betulaceae*, the staminate flowers are developed the previous season and grow into drooping, tassel-like catkins four to six inches long. It is this preformed flower which allows the exceedingly early blooms. Among the smallest of flowers, they would be noticed by only the most avid botanists were they not massed together. As the catkins open, the stands of Alders form a pastel haze from the shedding pollen. Shortly after releasing their pollen they fall from the shrub.

The female flowers are in strobiles (structures which resemble little hemlock cones) from one-half to one and one-half inches long. These fruiting bodies are green when fresh but darken and become woody as they age. After releasing their seeds, they remain on the plant until the following year at which time they will normally begin to disintegrate. The seeds are too dry and hard to attract wildlife. However, deer will eat the twigs when food is scarce.

Commonly found along the margins of ponds and streams, these alders may also be found growing in shallow water. Although short-lived, alders grow rapidly, often forming thickets. Companion plants often include Spice Bush, *Lindera benzoin*, Sweet Pepperbush, *Clethra alnifolia*, Button Bush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, Silky Dogwood, *Cornus amomum*, and Virginia Willow, *Itea virginica*.

When you are out doing some winter botanizing, take a look at these plants. It is during the winter we are more likely to take time to appreciate those plants with flowers which are less spectacular, less eye-catching, but essential not only as wildlife habitat but also for the stability of our soils. And, if you don't routinely carry a hand lens, you might want to consider doing so. A closer look at buds, flowering and fruiting structures will leave you amazed by their intricacies.





## A Challenge

By Dorothy C. Bliss

A few weeks ago some friends of mine were walking along a path through some woods near Charlottesville when they encountered a row of trees underneath which the ground was covered with masses of huge leaves. They brought back to Lynchburg a couple of these leaves which had a single blade nearly two-and-a-half feet in length and eight to ten inches wide! They wondered if I recognized the tree. The leaf was so distinctive I was sure I had never seen it before. They remembered the trunk was smooth and somewhat shiny and that the trees were perhaps 30 feet tall but, basically, that and the two dried leaves in a plastic bag were all the information they could give me. To these facts I could add that the trees were deciduous but whether the leaves were alternate or opposite or the kind of leafbud, etc., I had no clue. I promised to do my best.

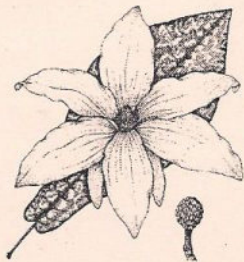
A little later, as I was walking along my driveway, I noticed the leaves of a young *Magnolia grandiflora* were more than eight inches in length and suddenly I wondered if the unknown tree could be a member of the Magnoliaceae. I immediately checked the Magnoliaceae and the description of one of the species matched my specimen perfectly. Eureka! The leaves were shiny and dark on the upper surface and the lower epidermis was white with nearly invisible tiny hairs. The margin was entire, not toothed, and the size given, up to three feet in length corresponded. There was no question of the identification of these specimen as *Magnolia macrophylla*, Big-Leaf Magnolia, sometimes called White Cucumber Tree.

The Audubon Tree Guide lists Silver-Leaf Magnolia and Umbrella Tree as alternate names. Except for tropical palms, these magnolias have the largest blade of all North American plant species. The fragrant cup-shaped flowers are ten to twelve inches across and consist of six white petals with a dark spot on each.

Andre Michaux discovered this tree near Charlotte, N.C. in 1789. The Big-Leaf Magnolia is native to the Carolinas south into Florida and west

to Arkansas and Ohio. Arthur Stupka in his *Trees, Shrubs and Woody Vines of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park* lists three species, *M. acuminata*, *M. fraseri* and *M. tripetala*, as known to occur in the Park but there is no evidence that *M. macrophylla* is present there. He writes that the Big-Leaf Magnolia has been found about four miles north of the Park, near Gatlinburg. In the *Virginia Atlas*, it is listed for Lee County in southwestern Virginia. The grove/row of trees near Charlottesville must have been introduced. I found that it is listed for sale in Woodlander's Catalog at \$12.50. One source mentioned that the huge leaves are easily shattered by the wind, giving the tree a ragged appearance, and therefore, not suited for exposed areas. Just imagine raking up quantities of these mammoth leaves! I don't want one in my yard, but I would love to see the tree in full bloom with its ten-inch-or-more fragrant white flowers. Maybe next May!

The challenge proved to be no challenge at all!



## WINTER BOTANY

By William Hunley

Learning to identify deciduous trees and shrubs in winter can be a challenging pastime for the native plant enthusiast. Listed below are several of our native tree species and some of their distinguishing characteristics.

### Red Oak Group

**Black Oak** (*Quercus velutina*). Bark is black, ridged and furrowed. Inner bark layer is yellowish.

**Northern Red Oak** (*Quercus rubra*). Bark is gray and smoother than Black Oak. Inner bark is reddish. More often found in moist soil than Black Oak or Scarlet Oak.

**Scarlet Oak** (*Quercus coccinea*). Similar to Red Oak but prefers dry soil of south facing slopes and ridge tops. The base of the trunk on mature trees often appears to be swollen. Lower branches of forest trees are often dead due to intolerance to shade.

### White Oak Group

**White Oak** (*Quercus velutina*). Bark is pale gray and flaky. Grows in a wide variety of soil moisture conditions.

**Chestnut Oak** (*Quercus prinus*). The most abundant oak of dry mountain slopes in our area. Bark is gray and deeply fissured. Inner bark is red.

### Hickories

**Shagbark Hickory** (*Carya ovata*). Bark peels in large plates giving the tree a shaggy appearance. Terminal bud is large (1/2 inch). Grows in moist soil.

**Bitternut Hickory** (*Carya cordiformis*). Twigs are small (for a Hickory) with mustard yellow terminal buds. Grows in bottomland soils.

### Maples

**Silver Maple** (*Acer saccharinum*). Twigs have opposite growth pattern (like all maples) and give off rank odor when broken. Bark is shaggy in appearance. Grows in river flood plains.

**Striped Maple** (*Acer pensylvanicum*). Branches opposite, greenish, with vertical white stripes. Grows in moist soils.

### Magnolias

**Tulip Poplar** (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). Grows very tall and straight. Cone-like fruit is reminiscent of a tulip.

**Cucumber Magnolia** (*Magnolia acuminata*). Straight growth form. Very large terminal buds (1/4 inch).

### Tupelos

**Black Gum** (*Nyssa sylvatica*). A medium sized forest tree with rough, gray bark and branches that grow at 90 degree angles from the trunk.

### Birches

**Sweet Birch** (*Betula lenta*). Bark is dark brown with horizontal lines (lenticels). Twigs have strong aroma of wintergreen.

**Yellow Birch** (*Betula lutea*). Bark is yellowish, papery and peeling. Twigs have wintergreen aroma like Sweet Birch, but not as pungent. Grows at high elevations.

### Suggested Reading

**Woody Plants in Winter** by Earl L. Core and Nelle P. Ammons, Boxwood Press 1958.

**A Guide To Nature in Winter** by Donald W. Stokes, Little, Brown & Co. 1976.

**Winter Tree Finder** by May Theilgard Watts and Tom Watts, Nature Study Guild, 1970.

**Trees and Shrubs of Kentucky** by Mary E. Wharton and Roger W. Barbour, University of Kentucky Press, 1973.



## Lynchburg Area Members

Dorothy C. Bliss

On a cold and windy mid-January day, there were no flowers in bloom, but March is the earliest we expect any blooms in the Randolph-Macon Woman's College Botanic Garden. The evergreen leaves of the Christmas ferns, marginal shield fern and polypody were much in evidence. The basal rosettes of the Cardinal flowers were covered with fallen leaves, some of which I removed since this species is dependent upon photosynthesis to survive.

A few of the beautyberries were still clinging to the stems but the wintergreen berries, of which I wrote in our last Newsletter, had nearly disappeared. I could find only a couple of berries amid the glossy green foliage under the Franklinia. The deciduous holly, winterberry holly and chokeberry still presented a colorful display of bright red berries. Evidently these are not the favored morsels for the birds and squirrels and possibly some other mammals. As you would expect, the fallen twigs and leaves of the China fir were knee deep on the ground, just waiting for the arrival of the spring volunteers!

The only flower I saw was that of a lone dandelion in the grass near the edge of the Garden. This will change in the months ahead and we will be looking forward to the first spring blossoms. Among the earliest flowers are the catkins of the pussy willow and the skunk cabbage, neither of which is present in the Botanic Garden. In Virginia, the honor for the first spring flower is usually granted to skunk cabbage which may be found in bloom in February. By mid-March, one can expect to encounter bloodroot, golden ragwort, Greek valerian and shale barren phlox, among others. I have been keeping

records for the last ten years of the blooming time of these early flowering species. These dates may vary somewhat from year to year but the long term data are of particular interest as we learn more about global warming. Below is an incomplete list of the common names of the flowers that are expected to bloom in March in the Garden.

Hepatica  
Bloodroot  
Rue Anemone  
American Columbine  
Greek Valerian  
Golden Ragwort  
Spring Beauty  
Dutchman's Breeches  
Green and Gold  
Shale Barren Phlox  
and others

When you have an opportunity to visit the Randolph-Macon Woman's College Botanic Garden in March, why don't you keep a record of any plant you see in bloom! The more data, the more significance. To make the list more meaningful, a note should be added on whether this is a single first bloom or if the plant has several blooms or if it is in full bloom. If you would like a plant list for the Garden, I will be glad to give you a copy.

Permission is hereby given to reprint original material. Please credit author, if named, and source.

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### R-MWC Botanic Garden Calling All Volunteers

**Saturday, March 11  
2:00-4:00 p.m.**

Vacation is over  
and it is time for our  
spring work session!  
This will include a general  
clean-up with  
Removal of fallen leaves  
and branches  
(especially the China fir),  
Refreshing paths  
with cypress chips,  
Weeding and adding  
mulch where needed.

Rain date  
March 18, same time.

Bring work tools if possible.  
Hope to see you on March 11.  
Questions, call Dorothy Bliss,  
434-846-5665.

### Rekindled Memories

Several members have asked about the poem, "September," in our fall Newsletter. Esther Atkinson, a long-time member, provided the poem. It is from the Elson Grammar School Reader Book One, c 1911.

One of our members said he could remember singing the words when he was young. Another said her mother, who was born in 1912, recited this and another of Helen Hunt Jackson's poems, "October's Bright Blue Weather," at least once every autumn while raking leaves.

We have also had a member ask if we had the words to "November Rain," which is from the same time period. Can anyone help?