



VNPS 40 Year Celebration: 1982-2022

# Sempervirens

The Quarterly of the Virginia Native Plant Society



*With the limestone arch known as Natural Bridge in the background, members of the Society prepare to explore the Cedar Creek Trail at Natural Bridge State Park. The hike was one of many afternoon walks provided after the morning's gathering. The Annual Meeting, the first in-person gathering since the pandemic began in 2020, marked the 40th anniversary of the Virginia Native Plant Society.*

## Annual Meeting celebrates Society's 40 years

How gratifying it was to have about 90 members meet in person at the historic Natural Bridge Hotel for our annual meeting that celebrated our 40th anniversary! With just a few short months to plan, Sally Anderson and I quickly settled on Natural Bridge as our location for a one-day event on September 17. The hotel's relationship with the state park was also a factor in our decision. Our goal was to hold an in-person event that would minimize the risk of Covid to our participants. The speaker's presentation and our business meeting would be held outdoors followed by afternoon field trips. We took our chances on the weather.

We were pleasantly surprised to discover that a number of out-of-town participants decided to arrive Friday afternoon. Many of us socialized on the veranda where the weather was

most pleasant. Both new and longtime members shared their pent-up news over drinks. New friends ate dinner together at the hotel restaurant and afterward enjoyed a campfire behind the hotel.

Despite a forecast for a sunny day, Saturday morning's sky was gray with some fog, not something that we anticipated! The tables and chairs that staff set up the night before were damp. VNPS Office Manager Karen York and her husband Robin set up the registration table in a breezeway next to the food buffet, and the event was underway. Katherine Smith added native Pawpaws to the catering staff's fresh fruit selection.

As we tried to stretch the extension cord for the sound system out on the lawn, speaker Devin Floyd decided he could present without augmentation. The terraces on the lawn were perfect for the audience's view and Devin

could project—without a PowerPoint or projector. Using Kevin Howe and Mary Jane Epps as whiteboard holders, Devin, Director of the Center for Urban Habitats, commanded a rapt audience and used sketches to supplement his talk on Piedmont Prairies. He dispelled the myth that the land east of the Mississippi River was one continuous forest before European settlement. Piedmont Prairies existed with regularly occurring fires. Continual plowing destroyed the soil and the native seedbank, but remnant prairies persist, especially in odd corners of fields that the plows could not touch. Today utility rights-of-way are some of the best spots to find these remnant prairies.

The business meeting was a difficult act to follow after Devin's riveting presentation, but the audience was *(See Annual Meeting, page 2)*

# Annual Meeting at Natural Bridge a success

(Continued from page 1)

polite and attentive. We celebrated our 40th year and the resurrection of the Shenandoah Chapter, held elections, and announced that our annual fundraiser will benefit Shenandoah Mountain by supporting the buyouts of outstanding mineral rights leases attached to some parcels in the National Forest. Mark Miller, executive director of the Virginia Wilderness Committee, spoke about his organization's efforts to permanently protect the area by creating the Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area. That enabling legislation was introduced in the U.S. Senate earlier this year. In the past, VWC was instrumental in the passage of legislation designating existing wilderness areas in the George Washington & Jefferson National Forests.

Following Miller's presentation, Society charter member Marion Lobstein shared some memories of the early days of VNPS. To close our meeting, Jerome Prochaska provided some light-hearted remarks on behalf of the spouses of members.

With blue skies overhead and box lunches in hand, we were off to afternoon field trips. Many of us chose to stay close at hand and explore the Cedar Creek

Trail at Natural Bridge State Park. Jim Jones, Park Superintendent, greeted us at our meeting spot in front of the visitor center. Those who wanted to avoid the 120 steps down (and back up) to the trail rode the van that tour guide Cassidy, offered. An archaeologist by training, Cassidy filled us in on the geology and history of the majestic bridge. She pointed out the initials reputed to be those of George Washington that were carved into the stone under the bridge. She professed no knowledge of native plants, but the many accomplished botanists in our group were delighted to share their knowledge. Blue Lobelia, White Turtlehead that was actually pale pink, Rattlesnake-root, both Spotted and Pale Yellow Jewelweeds, Crownbeard, goldenrods and asters provided floral colors along the trail. Invasive plants were all too present as well, but Master Naturalists and volunteers from our Upper James River Chapter have been steadily working on removal efforts. Liverworts and many native ferns,



Society members botanize along the Cedar Creek Trail at Natural Bridge.

including Walking Fern, grew from the crevices in the stones. The crown jewel was the hoped-for discovery of Western Stiff Gentian (*Gentianella quinquefolia* var. *occidentalis*) in bloom in a flat area. This lovely purple flower is rated S-1, critically imperiled in Virginia, and occurs in only three counties: Rockbridge (at Natural Bridge), Pulaski, and Russell. According to the *Flora of Virginia*, its habitat is limestone and dolostone woodlands and barrens in the Ridge and Valley province. Besides the enchanting gentian, several of us also encountered a Woodland Box Turtle and a Copperhead Snake near the trail.

Several other outstanding field trips were offered through Sally Anderson's organizational and botanical efforts, and members of the Shenandoah Chapter provided excellent reports of them in their October newsletter. Read them online at [https://vnps.org/shenandoah/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/dlm\\_uploads/2022/10/Shenandoah-News-October-2022.pdf](https://vnps.org/shenandoah/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/dlm_uploads/2022/10/Shenandoah-News-October-2022.pdf).

While the official annual meeting ended with the field trips, many of us stayed at the hotel Saturday night and continued our in-person celebration with social time on the veranda and dinner together in the hotel's restaurant. We proclaimed our modified annual meeting a success and look forward to planning and attending next year's event.

--Nancy Vehrs, VNPS President



The speakers' presentations and the business portion of the meeting were held outside.

# The past year provided many highlights



## From the President, Nancy Vehrs

As we look back on our 40th year as an organization, I would like to share some of our achievements, especially those over this past year.

- Thanks to the leadership of Anna Maria Johnson and others, we formally reactivated the Shenandoah Chapter in September. It is flourishing with talks, plant swaps, walks, and the undertaking of the creation of a Plant Ridge and Valley Natives guide due out Earth Day 2023.
- At this point in time, we have 2,580 statewide members and 12 chapters.
- We raised more than \$60,000 for the Natural Area Preserves Fund at our annual fundraiser last fall with a successful online auction that supplemented member donations. Our 2022 fundraiser will support Shenandoah Mountain and help to acquire outstanding mineral rights that block the possible Wilderness designation.
- The board appointed our first Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Chair, Melody Mobley, who was formally elected at our annual meeting. She has developed a DEI Committee with representatives from around the Commonwealth. We expect to receive recommendations from the committee soon.
- We highlighted Buttonbush, *Cephalanthus occidentalis*, the 2022 Wildflower of the Year. We thank Botany Chair John Hayden, artist Elena Borklund Maza, and editor Nancy Sorrells for an excellent brochure.

• Publicity Chair Ashley Moulton initiated a contest for the design of a Buttonbush T-shirt. Artist Merenda Cecelia's winning design adorns our very popular T-shirts that are sold on our website directly through the vendor Bonfire. We also have a 40th anniversary shirt that celebrates our first wildflower of the year, the Virginia Bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*). It was designed by Virginia Witmer and Max Schlickemeyer.

- Because of the continuing Covid-19 pandemic, we held our annual workshop virtually through Zoom for the second year. The topic of how plants and geology interact was presented over two Tuesday evenings, March 8 and 15, with two expert speakers each night. Many thanks to Education Chair Joey Thompson for finding the speakers and coordinating the event. These virtual presentations are reaching a wide audience. We also held an additional educational presentation on May 25, "Beyond Colonial Notions: New Plant Kinships," with Nikki Bass and Robinson. It was recorded and is available to our membership by request.
- Under the leadership of Conservation Chair Barbara Ryan, the board approved an updated conservation statement that is posted on the website.
- Following the report of an ad hoc investments committee, the board adopted an investment policy and recently appointed a standing investments committee.
- The board awarded two research grants for 2022:
  - An Assessment of Native Grasslands of the East-Central Piedmont of Virginia submitted by Devin Floyd, Center for Urban Habitats & Mary Jane Epps, Mary Baldwin University. Grant Amount: \$14,750
  - Native Lianas of Virginia's Appalachian/

Blue Ridge Forests: Environment and Ecology submitted by Lynn Resler, Virginia Tech, Grant Amount: \$5,305

- During this past General Assembly session, we worked with Delegate David Bulova to introduce follow up legislation to the 2021 House Joint Resolution 527 study. This study was created to explore options for phasing out the sale and use of invasive plants in Virginia's horticultural industry, and to promote the sale and use of native plants, but there was no resulting action. Delegate Bulova's bill in the 2022 session failed in subcommittee on a party line vote. We continue to work with state legislators. We must have bi-partisan patrons for legislation to have a chance of passage.
- In September the Board endorsed a petition initiated by member Lauren Taylor to "Stop Home Depot from Selling Invasive Plants." The petition is posted on Change.org and is approaching 70,000 signatures.
- After the 2020 and 2021 annual meetings were held virtually because of Covid, the board decided in June to hold this year's event in person. We had a very successful one-day event at Natural Bridge, and I am grateful to Sally Anderson for all her diligent work in planning and executing this modified annual meeting.
- In the virtual world, we increased our Instagram presence to more than 4,400 followers thanks to Publicity Chair Ashley Moulton. Our VNPS Facebook Group now has over 41,000 members, effectively more than tripling the number we had at this time last year. We have an active administration group that includes Laurie Dodd, Garrie Rouse, Scott O'Brien, Lauren Taylor, Brian Magurn, Ann Hardy, Heather Barnett, Steve Young, and me. Many thanks to this great group of dedicated volunteers. This Facebook  
(See Past year, page 7)

# Buttonbush

## A common wetland plant present in rare plant communities

Article by W. John Hayden, Botany Chair; photos by Gary P. Fleming

In general, there are two complementary approaches to the study of plant ecology. On the one hand there is autecology, the study of individual species' adaptations to the living and non-living elements of their environment; autecology focuses on individual species. On the other, we have synecology, which addresses the dynamic interactions that occur between the multiple species that comprise definable communities of organisms. In this article, the focus is on several rare plant communities that occur in Virginia and in which our 2022 Wildflower of the Year, *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Buttonbush), plays prominent roles.

Ecological communities are routinely recognized, defined, and named, based on unique combinations of plant species coupled with salient elements of their physical environment. Why focus on the plants and, thus, ignore microbes and animals in the characterization of ecological communities? Simply, because plants are immobile, easily observed with the naked eye, with practice relatively easily identified to species, and easily measured in terms of their biomass cover. Further, plants create many of the specialized niches that are exploited by the microbes and animals that co-inhabit the community. Elements of the physical environment are also extremely important in characterization of ecological communities because soil pH, soil base cation levels (calcium, magnesium and potassium), moisture, slope, elevation, etc., are significant in determining which plants thrive where. The all-important combinations of plant species that define plant communities are referred to as "associations"—usually defined by a unique combination of species that makes up the total

floristic composition. Unique plant associations can be named by the scientific binomials or common names of the most characteristic (i.e., dominant or diagnostic) species—alternatively, as classified for Virginia, each association also can be referred to by means of a brief description of physical features alone or integrated with the name of one or more characteristic species. Just as individual plant species may be common or rare, distinct plant associations, too, may be of common or rare occurrence.

What follows are descriptions of three plant associations found in Virginia that are considered globally rare (i.e., ranked G1) and also include Buttonbush. Rare plant associations may, indeed, provide habitat for some rare plants, but the rarity of an association typically results from its affiliation with an unusual habitat type. Common plants are also part of the mix and, as explained above, if a common plant is present and dominant, the criteria for naming the association will gravitate toward the dominant elements. So that is the theme for what follows, rare plant associations in which our relatively common Buttonbush is present as a dominant element.

**Central Appalachian Montane Depression Pond** (Three-way Sedge–Buttonbush type) (Figure 1). Dominant members of the association are: *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Buttonbush), *Dulichium arundinaceum* (Three-way Sedge), *Persicaria hydropiperoides* (Swamp Smartweed), *Glyceria acutiflora* (Creeping Mannagrass), and *Proserpinaca palustris* (Marsh Mermaidweed). This association is known only from Virginia and occurs in two somewhat different settings. The first, often referred to as a "sag pond," is on gentle mountain crests

or slope benches where the collapse of underlying landslide masses has caused the surface soils to slump and form a depression. The second, colloquially known as a "Shenandoah Valley sinkhole pond," has formed in deep alluvial fan deposits that were eroded off the adjacent Blue Ridge during the last glacial episode, covering a valley landscape formed by limestone and dolostone rocks with numerous caves. Over time, the ponds were formed by the dissolution of calcium and/or magnesium carbonates, the collapse of caves in subsurface layers, and the slumping of the surface alluvial fans. In both settings, the depressions are seasonally flooded by aquifers in the near surface rocks and contain strongly acidic soils weathered from the surface materials in which they formed. Typically, these ponds become dry by late summer, resulting in a seasonal hydrologic cycle that is challenging for many plant species. Whereas Three-way Sedge is nearly always present in this association, Buttonbush is of somewhat more variable occurrence but still frequent enough to be considered a characteristic, sometimes dominant element. When present, Buttonbush is often found along pond margins, but it also completely dominates the basins of some ponds. These montane depression ponds contain numerous rare plants and animals. Globally rare plants include *Boltonia montana*, *Helenium virginicum* (Virginia Sneezeweed), *Isoetes virginica* (Virginia Quillwort), and *Scirpus ancistrochaetus* (Northeastern Bulrush). Among the state-rare plants that are disjunct from the Coastal Plain are *Carex barrattii* (Barratt's Sedge), *Eleocharis melanocarpa* (Black-fruited Spikerush), and *Eleocharis robbinsii*



Figure 1. Buttonbush and Three-way Sedge inhabiting a montane depression pond, on the summit of the Blue Ridge at Big Levels, Augusta County.



Figure 2. Bald Cypress Maritime Swamp Forest, First Landing/Seashore State Park, Virginia Beach; Buttonbush and Swamp Loosestrife at the water's edge and on cypress knees; note the Great Horned Owl on a Bald Cypress branch.

(Robbins' Spikerush). State-rare plants disjunct from further north include *Carex lasiocarpa* (Slender Sedge), *Hypericum boreale* (Northern St. John's-wort), and *Schoenoplectus torreyi* (Torrey's Bulrush). Globally, there are fewer than 20 of these montane depression ponds that have this particular combination of dominant plant species; together these 20 sites comprise a total of area less than 50 acres. Threats to this rare association include outright destruction or alteration to serve as livestock ponds, depletion of water tables, trash dumping, and ATV incursions.

**Lake Drummond Pondshore.** Lake Drummond is a freshwater lake near the center of the Great Dismal Swamp of southeast Virginia. The lake, which may have originated from a meteor impact or deep peat fire, is large, with an area of more than 3,000 acres; the plant association of interest here occurs at five different locations along the lake shore, collectively these five patches of distinctive habitat comprise, approximately, just two and a half acres. Dominant plants of the Lake Drummond Pondshore association include: *Taxodium distichum* (Bald Cypress), *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Buttonbush), and *Juncus repens* (Lesser Creeping Rush). State-rare plants that have been recorded include *Lachnanthes caroliniana* (Redroot), *Sagittaria engelmanniana* (Engelmann's Arrowhead), and *Xyris fimbriata* (Fringed

Yellow-eyed Grass). In this association, Bald Cypress occurs as well-spaced trees, resulting in an open canopy. Soils are sandy and peaty, and these areas are periodically flooded as lake water rises and falls seasonally. Clearly, Lake Drummond is unique and, consequently, this special pondshore association of plants is globally rare.

**Mid-Atlantic Maritime Bald Cypress Swamp Forest** (Figure 2). This plant association forms near the coast in deeply flooded swales between ancient sand dunes well removed from the ocean. Globally, there are only two known examples, one of which is in First Landing/Seashore State Park and the other in northeastern North Carolina. The Virginia site comprises about 30 acres. Dominant species include *Taxodium distichum* (Bald Cypress), *Nyssa biflora* (Swamp Tupelo), *Liquidambar styraciflua* (Sweetgum), *Cephalanthus occidentalis* (Buttonbush), *Boehmeria cylindrica* (Small-spike False Nettle), and *Ceratophyllum muricatum* (Prickly Hornwort). Buttonbush occurs in patches on hummocks along the margin of the swale where it is joined by *Decodon verticillata* (Swamp Loosestrife), *Eubotrys racemosa* (Fetterbush), *Morella cerifera* (Wax Myrtle), *Itea virginica* (Sweetspire) and *Lyonia ligustrina* (Maleberry). No rare plants occur in this community type, but

the association itself is one of the rarest in eastern North America.

What might one conclude about common plants occurring in rare plant associations? Is there any insight to be gained from the knowledge that Buttonbush can be found in some globally rare plant associations but is also common in diverse wetland habitats across the state? My take is that this phenomenon is what one should expect of biodiversity. Some plant species are exceedingly common while others are vanishingly rare. The same is true of plant associations—some are common, and others are rare. Moreover, some rare plant associations are comprised of relatively common species, but rare species find refuge in other rare associations. Biodiversity appears to be inherently, pervasively, idiosyncratic. That is just how our natural world is. Put simply, details matter.

**Acknowledgments.** I am indebted to friend and colleague, Gary Fleming, for suggesting the topic and providing helpful suggestions on an early draft. The rare natural communities discussed here were defined and described by Natural Heritage Program ecologists during development of the U.S. National Vegetation Classification (USNVC); further details can be found at the NatureServe Explorer web site (<https://explorer.natureserve.org/>) or at <https://usnvc.org>. ❖

# Restoring Piedmont's grassland wilderness

## From Your Natural Heritage Program

By Ryan Klopf  
Mountain Region Steward &  
Natural Area Science Coordinator



Historically, the landscape of Halifax County was a mosaic of open woodlands, savanna, and grasslands. The interactive disturbances of fire and grazing, combined with episodic droughts limited the abundance of trees, thereby maintaining a high light environment ideal for a rich and spectacular herbaceous plant community. In recent centuries, much of this diverse landscape has been lost as a result of agricultural development and more recent conversion to Loblolly Pine plantations. The Virginia Natural Heritage Program has been a leader in protecting and restoring some of the last and best remaining examples of these unique grassland ecosystems. One of the best examples of Piedmont restoration can be witnessed at Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve, home to over 650 plant species, including 26 rare or uncommon plants.

Protection work at Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve began in 2001; today the preserve is 820 acres. Prior to 2001, much of the preserve was planted with Loblolly Pine for commercial

purposes. The densely planted pines were steadily reducing light availability to the hundreds of heliophytic grasses, sedges, forbs, and legumes that contribute much to the biodiversity of Difficult Creek NAP. Thus began two key facets of the intervention and restoration approach developed and led by Natural Heritage stewardship staff: prescribed fire and thinning. Since 2001, stewardship staff have completed 28 prescribed burns at Difficult Creek NAP, and selectively harvested much of the Loblolly Pine, thereby increasing herbaceous light levels, and promoting hundreds of species of fire-adapted grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees (e.g., oaks, hickories, and shortleaf pines).

Near the heart of the preserve lies management Unit 4. In addition to the spectacular biodiversity characteristic of the entire preserve, this 62-acre unit contains several significant populations of especially rare plants including *Marshallia legrandii* (Tall Barbara's-buttons - G1/S1) and *Echinacea laevigata* (Smooth Coneflower - G2G3/S2). Since 2001, stewardship staff have burned Unit 4 five times. While fire management benefited many of the species of native flora, and essentially eliminated regeneration of Loblolly Pine, the larger fire-resistant pines continued to grow,

and limit light availability to the native heliophytic vegetation.

In 2020, stewardship staff began to carry out a series of intervention steps to actively facilitate an ecological state change in Unit 4 for the benefit of native biodiversity. First, in November 2020, stewardship staff conducted a prescribed burn in Unit 4. This burn was purposefully timed to prime the understory flora for a forthcoming significant increase in light levels. For multiple reasons, including changes to soil chemistry, reduction in leaf litter, and even changes in soil temperatures due to the lower albedo of charcoal, burning generally promotes greater flowering and seed production among fire adapted grassland plants. Furthermore, there is some evidence that fall burns are slightly more beneficial to forbs than grasses.

In early 2021, stewardship staff contracted a local logger to harvest all Loblolly Pines, adhering to stringent specifications designed to minimize adverse ecological impacts. These specifications included pressure washing all logging equipment prior to moving onsite, minimizing damage to all trees left (e.g., oaks, hickories, and shortleaf pines), avoiding three rare plant exclusion zones (Photo 2), and a willingness to delay or suspend logging should soil moisture



Photo 1: Logging selectively removed Loblolly Pine. Note the retention of focal hardwoods and the lack of soil disturbance



Photo 2: Three populations of rare plants were excluded from logging. The Loblolly Pines in these areas will be girdled or hand felled.



Photo 3: Unit 4 in spring 2022, after a November 2020 burn, and summer 2021 removal of Loblolly Pines.



Photo 4: *Marshallia legrandii* flowering within Unit 4. The higher light in the back of the photo marks the edge of this rare plant exclusion zone within which logging equipment was prohibited.

become too high. In the spring of 2021 stewardship staff painted and flagged all focal (i.e., oaks, hickories, shortleaf pines) trees within Unit 4 to help the loggers more easily avoid damage to these trees. Then, after an exceptionally dry summer, logging began to selectively remove all Loblolly Pine trees from within Unit 4 (Photo 1). The logging took approximately two months and was only paused once due to heavy rains—although by that point, the loggers were glad for a day off!

Spring of 2022 saw a robust response of the grassland vegetation to the increased light levels. A rough field calculation by retired Natural Heritage Chief Biologist, Chris Ludwig, estimated

1/3 of a billion native grassland plants growing in April 2022 (Photos 3, 4).

While the current condition of Unit 4 is a success worth celebrating, much restoration and stewardship work remains—a steward's work is never done. The next steps in the restoration and management of Unit 4 are to apply herbicide to high priority invasive plant species (e.g., *Lespedeza cuneata*, *Miscanthus sinensis*), and prepare fire lines for the next prescribed burn this fall or winter to both promote native grassland vegetation and reduce the amount of logging slash on the ground.

With continued restoration work, the Virginia Natural Heritage Program will continue to improve the

ecological integrity of this unique and spectacular site. Specifically, through fire management, invasive plant management, and other stewardship projects, staff will maintain the high biodiversity of native species within the restored savanna structure. It's worth observing that the importance of Difficult Creek Natural Area Preserve goes beyond biodiversity conservation. The diversity of drought adapted grasses, forbs, and trees found at Difficult Creek NAP, enable this ecosystem to continue critical ecosystem functions (e.g., primary production, carbon sequestration) as climate change increases environmental stressors on forests of the Southeast. ❖

## Past year full of accomplishments

### (Continued from page 3)

group is averaging 300 new members a week, and the administrators are VERY busy. We are constantly on the lookout for spammers and trolls. We increased our regular Facebook page followers to 27,000. We would welcome additional administrators because only Ashley Moulton and I post on the site.

- Thanks to the efforts of our technology guru Mark Murphy, our website is active and engaging. In September he reported that there were 225,000 users and 487,000 page views during a recent 12-month period. We have more than 75

total videos available for viewing.

- At our September annual meeting we elected Virginia Outdoors Foundation natural lands manager Joseph Villari as an at-large member of the board and formally elected Barbara Ryan as our Conservation Chair and Melody Mobley as our first DEI chair. We also reelected board members Kevin Howe (1st VP), Joey Thompson (Education), Virginia Witmer (Publications), Ashley Moulton (Publicity), Jim Hurley (Director-at-large, Invasives), and Johnny Townsend (DAL-Natural Heritage).
- We commend our longtime invasives

plant educator Ruth Douglas as she leaves the board. Taking on the role of educating the public about the ecological damage caused by invasive plants and inspiring people to action is daunting work. Ruth has been an active and engaged member of the board, and we sincerely thank her for her faithful service.

- *Sempervirens* editor Nancy Sorrells has continued to produce an award-winning newsletter with a goal of quarterly 12-page issues.

May we have another productive year in 2023 and for many years to come. Thank you for being part of our organization. ❖

# Petition against invasives gathers momentum



Invasive Japanese Pachysandra, Moneywort, English Ivy and Periwinkle for sale at a Home Depot in Northern Virginia, July 2022. (Lauren Taylor photo)

Garden centers should be safe places to shop, a welcome respite from the all-too-busy world that surrounds us. Increasingly, however, unsuspecting consumers are discovering that some plants they have purchased for their home landscapes are not only non-native, they are invasive species that are causing harm to our forests, farms, and parklands.

Each year, invasive plants cost the U.S. economy between \$100-200 billion, according to a NASA report. In the state of Virginia alone, crop losses, poisoned livestock, devastated timberlands, diseased plants, and expensive management costs may reach \$1 billion.

In response to these escalating costs and devastating environmental impacts, the Virginia legislature tasked the Virginia Invasive Species Working Group in 2021 with developing “recommendations regarding statutory and regulatory changes intended to reduce or eliminate the sale and use of invasive plants in the Commonwealth and to promote the sale and use of native plants.”

However, six months of meetings failed to produce tangible results and the

final report, published in January 2022, was deeply disappointing for many of the participants, VNPS included.

Watching the Working Group succumb to the relentless pressure of the nursery lobby was just too much for one VNPS member. The author decided it was time to leverage consumer pressure via the powerful petition platform, Change.org. Over several months she meticulously gathered data from all 50 states, constructed a database of over 900 listed invasive species, visited Home Depot garden centers, and poured over the Home Depot website, identifying at least 34 invasive plants sold.

Many of the culprits have been landscaping industry favorites for decades. Standards like Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), Burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*), Chinese privet (*Ligustrum sinense*), and English ivy (*Hedera helix*) are some of the worst offenders, yet are still widely planted in every Virginia suburb to this day.

In June, the national petition was published and quickly gathered momentum. Local press picked up the

story, and Change.org shared the petition with targeted audiences. By late July, the petition had garnered over 40,000 signatures. As of this writing, over 68,000 people have signed, and the petition has been shared over 8,000 times.

The goal is to obtain over 100,000 signatures and deliver them to Home Depot’s CEO at the Atlanta headquarters office. Subsequent petition campaigns to Lowe’s will follow, in addition to large regional garden center chains and the major growers.

Removing invasive plants from the commercial trade is paramount if we are to make any headway in restoring the health of our ecosystems and protecting our native plants.

More information on the petition can be found at the campaign website, <https://www.justsaynohomedepot.org>.

--Lauren Taylor, VNPS Facebook Administrator

*The Virginia Native Plant Society supports this important petition regarding the sale of invasive landscape plants. While the board debated singling out one retailer, we acknowledge that this retailer is the industry leader. The Home Depot is one of only 30 companies that are part of the Dow Jones Industrial Average, and its stores are present in all 50 states. If we can persuade Home Depot to make changes, other landscape retailers will follow.*

*The threat of invasive plants to biodiversity and our local ecosystems cannot be overstated. They disrupt the natural plant-insect interactions that are the basis of the food web. Localities spend significant sums to combat invasive plants, and valiant volunteers spend countless hours in removal efforts. Invasive landscape plants may seem benign, but they escape to nearby natural areas and wreak havoc unbeknownst to the average homeowner. If these invasive plants are not offered for sale, buyers will choose other plants. Economic opportunities in native plant sales are available to the commercial landscape and nursery industry. ~Nancy Vehrs, President*





Members of the Prince William Wildflower Society, a chapter of VNPS, recently honored botanist, educator, and charter member Marion Lobstein with a bench at Deep Cut Meadow in Manassas National Battlefield Park. The text on the plaque on the back of the bench was brief because of park standards. Those present at the dedication are front, left to right: Brigitte Bégué Hartke, Harrison Glasgow, Marion Lobstein, and Nancy Vehrs. Back row: Alan Ford, Margaret Chatham, Doug Wedding, Robbie the dog, Valerie Neitzey, and Valerie Kenyon Gaffney. (Janis Stone photos).



## Land acquisition going forward—Can you help?

As many of you know, Virginia is blessed with 66 Natural Area Preserves, which contain some of the most unique natural communities and habitats for some of the rarest species in the Commonwealth. They are protected lands, which are managed by the Division of Natural Heritage in the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Many of these preserves, protected in perpetuity, are home to locally or even globally rare plant and animal species. Many of these are known from one small area in the state, which happens to be a Natural Area Preserve, like the Kentucky Lady's Slipper orchid, *Cypripedium kentuckiense*, found in Virginia only in Lancaster County's Hickory Hollow Natural Area Preserve. Many other rare species and habitats exist but have yet to be protected.

This program of community/habitat protection came about in 1986 through a cooperative agreement between the Commonwealth and The Nature Conservancy. Following much survey and study, the first Virginia Preserve (1990) was North Landing Natural Area Preserve. The Nature Conservancy was directly responsible for conceiving and underwriting the beginnings of such Natural Heritage programs in most of the states, but that is an intriguing and noteworthy story for another day.

Our Preserve system is not just a series of publicly owned protected areas; while all are protected, not all are owned by DCR. They are owned by many partners, public and private. About 40 are owned by DCR while the rest are owned by cities, counties, universities, the Virginia Department



Kentucky Lady's Slipper orchid—globally rare but protected in a Virginia Natural Area Preserve.

of Forestry, The Nature Conservancy, Northern Neck Audubon, and other groups. Eight are privately owned by conservation-oriented folks. At this time, 24 preserves are fully open to the public and many others can be accessed by arrangement. A few are closed to all except for those involved in DCR-approved scientific study.

The Preserve program expanded fairly rapidly at first—by 2007, the system had reached 50 preserves, with about seven added each year. The acquisition pace has slowed in recent years, with only about one added each year. There are a multitude of explanations for this slower pace but one glaring reason is that unique conservation valuable lands just do not come up for sale on a regular basis. And when they do, many are snatched up quickly by a buyer. As we all know, the wheels of government work much more slowly than the wheels of private citizens. Much of DCR's land acquisition funding comes through the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation (VLCF). VLCF receives variable funding each year from the

state so that any public state or local agencies, including Indian tribes and nonprofit land trusts, can apply for funding focused on protection of farm and forest lands, lands of cultural or historic significance, open areas, parklands, or natural areas. Needless to say, the requests for funding exceed the funding allocation. Nearly \$15 million was distributed in 2022 for 40 projects—all valuable, all important, all worthwhile projects but many others

were not funded simply because enough monies were not available.

This brings me to the goal of this article. As mentioned above, eight of our Natural Area Preserves are owned by private citizens and several of these folks are members of the Virginia Native Plant Society. They became aware of some unique conservation property for sale and were able to put up their own funds to buy the land much more quickly than any public agency. In some cases, they are holding the land until such time as the state can obtain the funding to purchase the land, usually through the VLCF annual funding. In other cases, the land continues to be privately held and the owners "dedicate" the property, through DCR, as a Natural Area Preserve knowing that it will remain, in perpetuity, protected just like a conservation easement. And they are very proud of this personal contribution to the future citizens of the Commonwealth.

With the above in mind, the Virginia Native Plant Society is **(See *Land acquisition, page 11*)**

## Land acquisition

(Continued from page 10)

seeking any conservation-oriented individuals, foundations, businesses or groups who might be willing to put up funding for such short notice land acquisition should parcels become available. In some cases, this would be a few years ownership until such time as funding becomes available through the state and the VLCF program so the state could ultimately purchase the property. In other cases, the land could be held privately and dedicated as a Natural Area Preserve or added to an existing Preserve, with or without, public access. I am personally aware of one such private/public arrangement as I am President of the Northern Neck Chapter of the National Audubon Society, which owns Hickory Hollow Natural Area Preserve and works closely with the Division of Natural Heritage in a private-public relationship.

If you are interested in possibly pursuing such a potential purchase, either as an individual or through a foundation, business or other group, please feel free to contact me at kevinmhowe@gmail.com. All inquiries and discussions will remain very private throughout any process going forward.

As an FYI, the impetus for this article follows the recent loss of a very valuable piece of property that adjoined an existing Natural Area Preserve. The property, holding a small colony of a critically endangered plant species, came up for sale but the funds could not be gathered in time to make the purchase and it was sold to a non-conservation-oriented party; final disposition going forward is unknown. VNPS seeks to help ensure that this will not happen again.

--Kevin Howe, VNPS First Vice President

## Fundraiser helping protect Shenandoah Mt.

Our Society has a very special fundraising project this year called "Protect Shenandoah Mountain Fund." VNPS will partner with the Virginia Wilderness Committee (VWC) and the Friends of Shenandoah Mountain (FSM) to help protect and preserve key wilderness areas in the proposed Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area (SMNSA).

Located west of the Shenandoah Valley in the George Washington National Forest, Shenandoah Mountain is one of the largest tracts of wild land in the Eastern U.S. It provides diverse wildlife habitat, outstanding outdoor recreation opportunities, and clean water for drinking and aquatic life.

On March 23, 2022, Virginia's U.S. Senators Tim Kaine and Mark Warner introduced the Shenandoah Mountain Act to establish a 92,000-acre Shenandoah Mountain National Scenic Area in Rockingham, Augusta, and Highland counties. Embedded within that scenic area are four Wilderness areas: Skidmore Fork Wilderness (Rockingham), Little River Wilderness (Augusta), Lynn Hollow Wilderness (Highland) and the Bald Ridge Addition to the Ramseys Draft Wilderness (Augusta).

Although the Forest Service owns the land in the proposed SMNSA, private individuals and companies own the underground mineral rights and can develop and extract those minerals. Underground mineral rights were not included for portions of these areas in the original Forest Service purchase back when they acquired the lands that make up the National Forest system. The Forest Service will not support Congressional Wilderness designation on tracts without mineral rights.

With our financial assistance, we hope to help VWC and FSM acquire mineral rights from the current owners and transfer those rights to the Forest Service. They need our help to continue identifying mineral rights ownership and to purchase the rights from those owners.

To help protect Shenandoah Mountain, donate online at [www.vnps.org](http://www.vnps.org) or send a contribution to VNPS, Protect Shenandoah Mountain Fund, 400 Blandly Farm Lane #2, Boyce, VA 22620.

To learn more about Shenandoah Mountain, visit friends of Shenandoah Mountain at <https://www.friendsofshenandoahmountain.org/>.

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E-mail items to Nancy Sorrells at [lotswife@comcast.net](mailto:lotswife@comcast.net).

Next submission deadline:  
January 31, 2023

# Mother Nature's Seasonal Holiday Decorations



When out walking in the outdoors, one can't help but feel that Mother Nature is getting into the spirit of the holidays with her greens and reds displayed on many winter plants. These photos show the habitat along Sounding Knob Road in Highland County at around 4,000 feet of elevation. (Nancy Sorrells photos)

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