

LUCILE KOSODO



Nurturing Nature

By Kristine Hojnicky

Lucile Kosodo has lived a life colored by diverse experiences, from her roots as a young child in Peru to her current role as President of the John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society. Her journey spans continents, academia, and a career as a language teacher, embodying resilience, curiosity, and a strong connection to the local community.

Born in Peru, Lucile spent her early years there before her family moved to Switzerland when she turned 18. Her trajectory took her

to the United States through a scholarship, landing her at Ohio Wesleyan University. Fate played a hand as she met her future husband there, which led to a move to Williamsburg in 1970 after Lucile graduated with a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University.

Over the years, like many in this community, Lucile witnessed the area evolve from a smaller enclave to a more developed town. "There were barely any red lights when I came here," she says with a laugh. But she's found

solace in her surroundings. As she puts it, "It just feels like home."

Lucile got a job as a foreign language teacher at James Blair High School and then went on to teach at both Lafayette and Jamestown High Schools. Her specialties were in French and Spanish.

Her involvement with the Virginia Native Plant Society began during a challenging time in her life. Amidst a divorce, a friend gave her a thoughtful gift of membership to the local

chapter, and she started going on the group's organized excursions to explore native plants.

"I thought it was wonderful," she says. "I knew nothing about the plants we would see on our walks because in Peru, the landscape is mostly desert. I started learning more about botany, and I loved studying new plants through our articles, guest speakers, and through the website of native Virginia plants."

The John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society was chartered in June 1984 and was named in honor of the colonial botanist, John Clayton. It's part of a larger state organization, but this chapter covers a wide geographic area including Gloucester, Mathews, Middlesex, James City, and York Counties as well as the cities of Williamsburg, Hampton, Newport News, and Poquoson.

In addition to field trips to explore native flora, educational programs include presentations to schools and civic organizations, workshops, plant rescue and relocation, conservation projects, a bi-monthly newsletter, and creating displays for libraries, schools, and events.

"We also now have an app, the Flora of Virginia app," Lucile says. "It connects across all your devices, and I find it to be a fantastic way to study about the plants."

Though she joined the organization as a volunteer member, Lucile also quickly found herself serving in leadership roles. First, she served as vice-president and then became president, a position she took on eight years ago. "I've been president much longer than I would have thought," she says with a smile. "But I have really grown with the organization."

One of the most visible activities the group sponsors is the Annual Native Plant Sale that used to be held each spring at the Williamsburg Botanical Gardens but has relocated to a much larger space downtown at the Williamsburg Community Building. This year's sale will take place on Saturday, May 4, and the group has scheduled a flurry of activities leading up to the event which primarily consist of potting parties, where they will take plants that members have grown or plants that have been donated to the group and repot them for purchase.

The purpose of the plant sale is to allow the nonprofit to raise money for three scholarships. Each year, the John Clayton chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society sponsors three school-age students to attend a summer nature camp in Vesuvius, Virginia, so they can learn more about native Virginia plants, animals, and geology, as well as study Virginia ecology and wildlife.

"They have an opportunity to take classes and participate in all sorts of programming to introduce them to and to educate them on native plants. It's an amazing experience that one of our members actually did herself when she was younger and now volunteers with our organization."

As members grow and raise plants throughout the year in preparation for the annual plant sale, the chapter's educational programming becomes even more important to their overall success. Lucile explains, "When I first began, I didn't know that raising native plants involves more than just putting a seed in the ground and watering it. For example, some plants need cold stratification, which means they're planted and kept

moist in cold conditions by being planted outdoors or refrigerated. Some seeds need to have their skin nicked a little bit with a piece of sandpaper or other rough surface so they will grow. These are bits of knowledge that I acquired through guest speakers that the organization has brought in for the benefit of its members."

Lucile has grown many plants over the years for the annual plant sale. She remembers fondly one year she and a friend nicknamed the walkway spanning from her home's entryway to the back gate the "Long Road to the Native Plant Sale" because of the sheer volume of native plants she was cultivating.

Another important activity that the group supports is conservation of native plants through rescue and relocation. "One example I recall is when the addition to the Air and Space Museum in Hampton was built. We went in and rescued plants that were living on that land, kept them alive, and replanted them in designated areas after the construction was completed. It's important work," she says.

Native plants have existed in Virginia for thousands of years and continue to be a critical part of the local ecosystem for many reasons. As plants grew over eons of time through propagation and cultivation, Lucile explains that they built interrelationships with birds and insects such as butterflies and native bees. It's a process that a plant from a foreign country or a man-made plant cannot do over several lifetimes.

"It's a misconception that planting, say, butterfly bushes, will take care of the local butterfly population," she says. "Caterpillars can only eat certain plants, and butterfly bushes are not it. So, without native plants, the eggs the butterflies lay will not be able to survive. That impacts our ecological system in many ways."

It's no surprise that Lucile eventually found her way to the world of botany. Her mother was an avid gardener in Peru, and while Lucile knew a lot about plants native to her home country, she's enjoyed learning about the complexities of her current one.

Lucile says what fuels her passion for native plants and her desire to continue volunteering and serving with the Virginia Native Plant Society is the dedication and enthusiasm of the group's members. "We have wonderful people who belong to this organization," she emphasizes.

And that dedication is what also drives new endeavors for the group to take on, which have a lasting impact in the community. "A former member of ours helped to plant a garden at Stonehouse Elementary School. It's full of native plants and is used to teach children about them. That member has since moved away from Williamsburg, so the garden is in the care of our chapter and is a wonderful resource for plants as well as a great educational activity for the children," Lucile says.

Just as members continue to do meaningful work in the community growing, protecting, and conserving native plants, so too will Lucile Kosodo do meaningful work as President of the John Clayton chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society, cultivating an environment where people can connect with and learn about the land they live on and the plants that inhabit it. NDN

To learn more about the Virginia Native Plant Society visit <https://vnps.org/>