



Photo: Betsy Washington

Claytonia



John Clayton Chapter, Virginia Native Plant Society

Redring or White Milkweed

Asclepias variegata

One of thirteen species of milkweed found in Virginia, it is not as well-known as other varieties though it was found in most counties of the state. It can be seen along dry shaded roadsides, open forests and woodland edges and savannas and prefers light to moderate shade and dry sandy soils.

July-August 2026

Happy Summer!

vnps.org/johnclayton

From the President: Cathy Flanagan

Greetings! Looking forward to fall!



Cooler weather and fall foliage will certainly be a welcome break. A tree I have always liked is Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*). It has stunning fall color, star-shaped leaves, and the wood is highly useful and attractive in color. Despite these positive attributes there are those who complain mightily about the messy leaves and the potential of tripping on the hard gumballs causing a fall. However, another plus is that it is the host plant for 30 species of butterflies and moths, including the Prometheus silkworm (*Callosamia promethea*). This

moth spins silk inside a curled host leaf and then glues the stem to a twig to hang over the winter. You can look for the cocoons on the following plants: Spicebush, Sassafras, Tulip Poplar and Sweet Bay. When the gumballs are dried, there can be 30-50 seeds inside which are dispersed by wind and animals. It's a long list of wildlife that like them, particularly squirrels, many birds, and even waterfowl. Large flocks of goldfinches are known to descend all at once on trees that are full of the gumballs.

What really intrigues me is the variety of colors the leaves of Sweetgum can produce – shades of green, yellow, orange, red, dark red, and even black.

So, I needed a refresher:

Chlorophyll **a** is the main pigment produced in all oxygen-producing photosynthesis. Its color is blue-green and it absorbs light mostly in the orange-red and violet-blue portions of the spectrum.

Chlorophyll **b** is a helper pigment that gathers extra light energy and passes it to chlorophyll **a**. It is yellow-green in appearance and absorbs light mostly in the blue and red regions helping to broaden the range of light a plant can use.



This handmade clay tile shaped as a Sweetgum leaf caught my eye at the Backyard Birder. It is a cheerful bit of art on my desk.

Cathy Flanagan

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Botanist, Botanical Consultant, Community Volunteer, and More – Meet One of the Founding Members of John Clayton Chapter, Part 1 (Look for Part 2 of this Profile in the next newsletter issue)

To help our members learn more about each other, we profile a member in each newsletter issue. Recently, we talked to Donna Ware about the path that led her to native plants, her career and the people who inspire her.

Claytonia: How did you discover native plants and what led you to the Virginia Native Plant Society (VNPS)?

Donna: I grew up freely roaming the overgrown pasture of our small farm in the Missouri Ozarks (near Springfield) where I was awed by marvels of many sizes, from tiny bluets to vervains, beebalm, and purple milkweed to hedge-apple, shagbark hickory, and the biggest sassafras that I have ever seen anywhere to date. Later, while my father flyfished small Ozark streams, I explored adjacent streambanks and bluffs, enjoying the diverse flora of those habitats. These experiences were the catalyst that led me to major in biology in college, to work as a student assistant in the college herbarium, and then to do graduate work in plant taxonomy. My dissertation study involved field work in numerous states to see each of the North American species of the genus *Valerianella* (a close relative of the medicinal *Valerian*) growing naturally. All of this exposure to native species and natural environments primed me (once married to Stewart Ware, planted in Virginia, and serving as Curator of the William and Mary herbarium) to fully appreciate the goals of organizations focused on education about and conservation of native plants and their habitats. So I became one of the founding members of the John Clayton Chapter of VNPS when it formed in 1984. It has been awesome to witness the evolution of VNPS into the phenomenally productive and influential organization it is today.



Claytonia: What are some of the achievements that you are most proud of?

Donna: I very recently had the opportunity to contribute the portion on *Valerianella* that is to appear in Vol. 18 of *Flora of North America*. Also, I was delighted beyond measure the day I learned that information from my journal publication on genetically-based fruit shape polymorphism in *Valerianella* had been incorporated into Todd Stuessy's Plant Taxonomy textbook (1990). It was a reference to the results of hybridizations I had done between two kinds of *Valerianella* often, but not always, found growing together and considered separate species because their fruits were radically different in shape ---sleek and bullet-like versus with three hairy-edged wings. Among plant species, having more than one strikingly different fruit shape is extraordinarily rare. The results showed that these two fruit types were under single gene control within one species, the 3-winged fruit shape dominant to the bullet shape (a 3:1 ratio similar to brown to blue eyes in humans). Not much had been done with plants up to that time in terms of determining the genetics of taxonomic characteristics as a tool for classification.

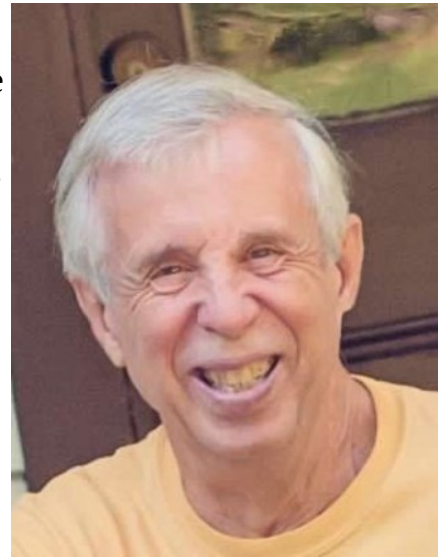
Other highlights of my career have been: serving as the botanical consultant for the book *Paintbrush and Shovel* by Nancy Kober, published by the Petersburg Garden Club; serving on the Board of the Flora of Virginia Project; and coauthoring with Nancy Hugo the history chapter for the *Flora of Virginia* (2012).

Profile Continues on Page 6

Remembering Ralph Will

by Donna Ware, with J. Pieper, Cortney and Travis Will

Longtime John Clayton Chapter member Ralph W. Will died peacefully at home on December 18th, 2025, at the age of 85. He was a graduate of Virginia Tech, where he studied engineering, and later he had a distinguished career as an aerospace engineer with NASA Langley in Hampton. He and his first wife, Carolyn, were the driving forces of the John Clayton Chapter's plant rescue program, which Carolyn chaired for many years. Many of these rescued plants made their way to various kinds of institutional gardens, including those at public schools, William & Mary, York River State Park and Hospice House of Williamsburg, to name a few. Ralph was a hard worker who dug, wrestled, hustled and hauled large shrubs and saplings from their rescue sites to their new protected gardens.



In addition, Ralph's efforts were key to the early development of the Williamsburg Botanical Garden (WBG), and he advocated for and helped install the much-needed deer fence around it. He also was especially keen on providing the public the opportunity to learn about the native plants of the deep, relatively inaccessible natural calcareous ravines that occur here in the Williamsburg area. To this end, he assisted Dr. Gerald Johnson of William & Mary in building the dry stack stone structure that cradles the "Calcareous Ravine" exhibit at WBG and he supplied the nutrient-rich soil for it. Together with Carolyn, he oversaw the initial populating of all the native habitats in WBG with appropriate rescued natives. Later, he worked with his son Travis Will and daughter-in-law Cortney to continue native plant rescue after Carolyn passed away in 2011.

Ralph's generosity and love of the natural world was evident in his investment in the young people in the area. In the years since Carolyn passed away, he sponsored roughly two dozen Nature Camp scholarships in her name in partnership with the John Clayton Chapter, ensuring that the next generation appreciates the values of conservation and service that they shared.

In 2012, Ralph married J Pieper of Williamsburg. Together, they made their home on Horn Harbor Creek on the Northern Neck, where he developed their own native plant garden. Ralph is remembered by his family and friends for his quiet dedication, curiosity, love of learning and his willingness to wholeheartedly volunteer. These characteristics fueled Ralph Will's appreciation of our native flora and his devotion to its protection.

Collaborating with Others to Promote Native Plants

Earth Day Celebration, April 18, 2026, Macicomoco State Park

By Jennie Davy

During the 2nd Annual Earth Day Celebration on April 18, Cynthia Ferentinos and I staffed a table in the park's interpretive meadow to talk about the activities of the John Clayton Chapter, advertise our Spring Plant Sale, and distribute literature on native plants, including the newly published [Native Plants for Southeast Virginia](#) guide. We had over one hundred people stop to ask us questions and take handouts, with particular interest in native plants to attract pollinators and deer-resistant and saltwater-tolerant natives.



We greatly appreciated the assistance and support of the park rangers, staff, and volunteers in the [Friends of Machicomoco State Park](#) organization. The rangers made it easy to transport our materials out to our table, even provided us with a canopy so we could survive the very sunny day, and the Friends group gave us rope and other supplies to hang our VNPS sign and keep our materials from blowing away during some gusty weather.



Representatives from fifteen organizations provided information, activities, and resources to visitors, including members from the Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia and Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Indian Tribe. I picked up information on the [Virginia Natural Area Preserve System](#) from the Department of Conservation & Recreation and look forward to planning a day trip to visit one of the coastal preserves. We also saw some John Clayton Chapter

members who were promoting other organizations such as [Friends of Dragon Run](#) and the [Middle Peninsula Master Naturalists](#).

Opened in 2021, [Machicomoco State Park](#) is the first state park celebrating and honoring the history and legacy of the Native Tribes of Virginia. Located in the southern part of Gloucester County along the York River, Machicomoco State Park was associated with Tsenacommacah and Powhatan's extensive Chiefdom as it is approximately 10 miles downriver from Werowocomoco.



Collaborating with Others to Promote Native Plants

Exciting Things Are Happening At Williamsburg Regional Library's, James City County Library!

The James City County Library (JCCL)'s new "natural playground" opened on April 25th this year. The grand opening day attracted over 1,000 adults and children! The playground features numerous elements inspired by nature, such as the otter chute slide and bear dens built into the hills,



a sand play area, and a story trail through the woods. The natural playground isn't just for kids though! The local wildlife has already discovered the improved habitat and people of all ages can learn about native plants by strolling past the native plant demonstration gardens and on the wooded trail behind the playground.

During the planning stage for the natural playground, the library requested advice from the Historic Rivers Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists (VMNs) regarding native shrubs and perennials that could be included in the landscaping. Two of those,

Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*) and American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) are currently in full bloom and attracting bees of various sizes and shapes, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

The library also invited VMNs to design and install native plant demonstration gardens. These gardens serve to illustrate a variety of native plants for different areas (e.g., ranging from full shade to full sun) and how to grow them. The native plant demonstration garden area includes a sign which will be changed periodically to cover timely nature-related topics. In the future, labels will be added to identify the native plants in the gardens, as well as a diverse sample of the native trees along the story trail, adjacent to the playground.

Although the JCCL native plant demonstration gardens are only a few months old, they are already attracting a variety of wildlife. In addition to the butterflies, bees and hummingbirds feasting on the native plants, we've seen frogs and toads seeking refuge from the heat among the ferns in the shade garden. As a result, playground visitors are enjoying seeing not only the beautiful native plants, but also the creatures that they attract.

Coming Soon:

Williamsburg Regional Library (WRL)
Fall Plant Share, the afternoon of
Sunday, October 25th
at the James City County Library.
Join us to learn more about native and
non-native plants, visit information ta-
bles where you can talk with other
plant enthusiasts, and pick up FREE
native plants and seeds.

Help Wanted by the WRL Seed Exchange

- ◇ Donations of seeds from native plants anytime at the circulation desk of either WRL location: Williamsburg or James City County.
- ◇ Volunteers to assist us with cleaning and packaging native plant seeds.
- ◇ Donations of native plants for the WRL Fall Plant Share in October.
- ◇ Volunteers to help maintain the native plant demonstration garden at the James City County Library's natural playground.

If you have questions or would like to help, please contact Cynthia at chf2virginia@gmail.com. Thank you!

Member Profile, Donna Ware, Continued from Page 2

Claytonia: What kind of people inspire you?

Donna: I am inspired by people who aren't daunted by laborious work but plug-away at worthy goals and accomplish them, who are passionate about issues, mobilize a solid background of knowledge and experience, and speak-out about them verbally and/or in writing. Someone who comes immediately to mind is the late Chapter member Cynthia Long, a longtime friend of so many in our organization and community.

I'm also deeply inspired by the courageous and big-hearted lives of members of a group of middle-aged adults with learning challenges who meet twice monthly at our church for Bible study and social activities, including parties. Despite the hurdles they face in everyday life, like in finding a job, living in group homes, dating, and for a few, marrying, they model grit and reliability, appreciate opportunities and show exemplary concern for the well-being of one another and for program leaders.

**If you know of a Chapter member, whom you'd like to profile in future issues of this newsletter, please let us know. Thank you.
(Emilia at jccvnps2@gmail.com)**

Stonehouse School Garden News

Help Wanted!

The Garden Habitat turns 22 this year and we are currently undergoing a major renovation. There is much to be done since the plants have overgrown their spaces. Once the overgrowth is cleared, without the use of herbicide (per a unanimous vote of the board), we will begin forming a dedicated committee of volunteers to assist with planning for the garden's rejuvenation. We will keep everyone updated and hope to have a "Happy Birthday" for the garden in the spring!

Please contact: Jennifer at jennifernaglemyers@gmail.com if you are interested in joining this committee



Welcome New Members!

David and Shirley Adams	Sandston
Deette Amspaugh	Williamsburg
Karin Bergsagel	Williamsburg
Thomas Boaz	Williamsburg
Felice Bond	Williamsburg
Joshua Cameron	Yorktown
Carol Churchill	Williamsburg
Alice Cooke	Williamsburg
Ryan Goodman	Williamsburg
Randi Helpinstill	Williamsburg
Holly Hildreth	Williamsburg
Robin Kester	Hampton
Katherine Lockhart-Cameron	Yorktown
Courtney Marshall	Williamsburg
Mac Mestayer	Williamsburg
Kyle Morford	Williamsburg
Christian Pena	Hampton
Kristi Polantz	Yorktown
Amy Richwine	Williamsburg
Mary Runnells	Gloucester
Chris and Stephanie Schmuck	Yorktown
Rachel Spivey	Newport News
Katherine and Chris Wilkins	Williamsburg

Join Us on Zoom!

Zoom lectures allow for a greater choice of speakers and more convenience. You can consult the presentation schedule on the website under the Events tab. The presentations are always recorded and the videos can be viewed at the link below

<https://vimeo.com/showcase/8054025>



Ghost Pipes (*Monotropa uniflora*)



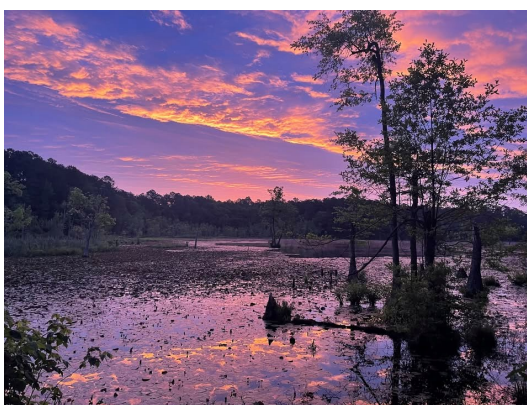
VIRGINIA NATIVE
PLANT SOCIETY

**John Clayton Chapter
VNPS
PO Box 1128
Williamsburg VA
23187**

**Apparel with Ghost Pipes,
2026 Wildflower of the Year,
is still available for purchase**

**at the link:
Virginia Native Plant Society |
Official Merchandise | Bonfire**

**(a number of colors and
designs available)**



**Save the Date for the
Annual Meeting!
October 2-4, 2026
Airfield Conference**

**Center
near Wakefield in
Southeastern Virginia
(details to come later
in the summer)**

Small Grants Program

Do you know of a school or community organization that is considering the development, planting or renovation of a **native plant garden** in our area? The John Clayton Chapter of the Native Plant Society might be able to help. Our chapter's service area includes the counties of James City, York, Gloucester, Matthews, and Middlesex, as well as the cities of Williamsburg, Newport News, Hampton, and Poquoson.

Consistent with our mission to educate the community about the benefits and value of native plants, we can provide small grants to such schools/groups. The grants will not cover the entire budget of a project but will contribute in a meaningful way and may be accompanied by expertise, advice and possible volunteer support. We would be glad to consider gardens or projects that:

- Involve school-age children and/or young adults in the project development and completion.
- Incorporate experiential learning programs.
- Provide a clear and well-thought-out plan for the garden's long-term maintenance.

**If you are interested to find out more or
would like to get a copy of the application
form, please contact Emilia at
jccvnps2@gmail.com.**



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