

New River News

August 2025

New River Chapter, VNPS

Programs for Fall Semester

Dates for our programs are: **September 9, October 14, November 11, and December 9**. Meetings start at **7 pm**. All meetings will be run with a Zoom component. The meeting location for the first two programs will be at the **Health & Human Services Bldg** located at **210 Pepper Street SE, Room 108/109**, in Christiansburg. Our November program is on a federal holiday, so the regular meeting place will not be open. The location for the November and December meetings is to be determined.

September 9. Ben Harder. History of Mushroom Production and Harvesting: the Power of the Fungi Kingdom.

Ben is a regular vendor at the Blacksburg Farmers Market. He started Den Hill Farm and Fungi in 2012. The farm is founded on principles of permaculture.

October 14. The Plant Clinic at Virginia Tech.

In a small room on the ground floor of Price Hall is the Plant Clinic. It receives plant specimens every day from the general public as well as from growers, and scientists doing plant research. The mission of the small staff of the clinic is to diagnosis any and all plant problems that come in and give recommendations for making the plants healthy again. Come and hear how they do it.

November 11. Jimmy Francis: Flora of Sweet Springs Natural Area Preserve.

Jimmy is Mountain Region Steward for the Division of Natural Heritage. Sweet Springs preserve is in Montgomery County. It is only open to the public by arranging a visit with Natural Heritage staff. Jimmy has agreed to lead a trip for us, but the date has not yet been selected.

December 9. Chapter Party, at a location to be determined.

For our last program of the year members share their interest in native plants by passing on their experiences from books, nurseries visited, trips taken, a project worked on, or a website found, or anything else plant related. Details will be sent later how to send in

your photos, slides, etc. Bring finger foods to share with your fellow native plant enthusiasts.

Fall Field Trips

(Brenda Graff)

So far only one field trip has been scheduled which will concentrate on trees. But late summer and fall are also good times to visit sites to see flowers. If anyone else has any suggestions, either to lead or just suggest a location, let Brenda Graff (graff_brenda@hotmail.com) know.

Saturday, November 15: Tree-related Microhabitats.

Time and location will be announced in early November. Professor Carolyn Copenheaver with VT forest resources and environmental conservation will lead a walk at the Corporate Research Center to look for tree-related microhabitats. Microhabitats refers to a small-scale environment that supports a distinct flora and fauna. Examples on trees include woodpecker holes, broken or dead branches, burls and lichens and mosses. She led a similar walk for the master naturalists at Nellies Cave Park several years ago and we were fascinated by all the microhabitats she showed us and who lived in them.

Outreach Events

(Brenda Graff)

The mission of the Virginia Native Plant Society, as stated in its bylaws, is “Promoting the conservation of Virginia’s native plants and habitats.” One way to pursue this mission is through education. The New River Chapter has several different educational projects. One of them is having a table at local events where our members explain to the public how to promote native plants in Virginia, such as how to create a native pollinator garden, how to get rid of invasive plants, and various other topics. They also display posters and give out handouts.

Both the chapter members and the public learn from each other. If you would like to help at one of the outreach events listed below, contact Brenda Graff at graff_brenda@hotmail.com. Or just attend one or more of the events. Details of these events will be published in our monthly list of events on our list serve, which Brenda will

be glad to add you to if you are not already on it. There are always more events that may be added to this list.

Saturday, September 27: Invasive Plant Pull near Heritage Park from 9 am to noon. For more details check out the chapter September list of events emailed to you recently. Dylan Vines with the Blacksburg parks and recreation Natural lands coordinator has invited our chapter to have a table there. I would like to have one there but cannot go myself since I have two other events that day. However, I can drop off the table and handouts if someone else can be there to talk to

people about invasives and our chapter. Contact Brenda Graff at graff_brenda@hotmail.com if you would like to help.

Saturday, October 18: Hokie Bugfest at VT from 9 am to 3 pm. This event is indoors and attended by several thousands of people and is a good way to inform the public about our chapter. Please contact Brenda Graff at graff_brenda@hotmail.com.

New River Chapter Elections will be held at the October 14 meeting

(Lauren Kerwien)

Three positions are open:

Vice President - offers support to the president, specifically when the President is absent.

Secretary - keeps Chapter and Board meeting minutes (in Google Drive) and distributes them to Chapter members via email.

Board Member-at-large - attends Board meetings and helps to organize monthly programs, field trips, and events.

Board meetings are held as often as the Board feels necessary. Current board meetings are every two to three months. If you are interested in serving, contact Rosemarie Sawdon (sawdon@msn.com).

VNPS-NR Grants Committee Updates

(Lauren Kerwien)

This summer the New River Chapter funded two grant projects-- see the project descriptions below.

Blacksburg High School - Mani:Ton Meadows

Students at Blacksburg High School are working to transform two acres of school grounds into thriving native plant habitats and outdoor learning spaces on the school's campus. This project includes the creation of a one-acre Monarch waystation test plot, while another acre will be reclaimed from invasive species and reforested using native trees and shrubs donated by the Virginia Department of Forestry. Students have already begun invasive species removal on the site and have established a plant nursery on campus to care for plants that will be installed this fall. Teachers are incorporating the project into their curriculum, offering hands-on opportunities for students to connect with ecology, conservation, and culture. Interpretive signage, volunteer workdays, and future infrastructure like trails and an outdoor classroom will help sustain and expand the project's impact.

Heritage Park Project

Live Work Eat Grow and the Town of Blacksburg are transforming a 20-by-100-foot section of land adjacent to the Heritage Park parking lot off Meadowbrook Drive into a native plant demonstration meadow. This project aims to showcase the beauty and ecological value of native grassland habitats. The site will feature educational signage identifying native grasses and forbs, highlighting the importance of pollinator-friendly, low-maintenance landscapes. Over the course of a year, the project will involve careful site preparation, including invasive species removal, solarization with a landscape tarp, and soil enhancement—followed by native grass seeding and the planting of nursery-grown forbs. The meadow will be maintained by the Parks and Natural Lands Coordinator and provides another opportunity for community volunteers!

Committee chair position - a note from Lauren

Hi all, my time in Blacksburg is coming to a close which means I will have to step down as the chair of the grants committee. I have enjoyed learning about the projects members of our community have thought up and worked to implement! The New River Chapter grant project was started to fund community and educational native plant projects in the New River Valley. Projects typically help to pay for community gardens, maintenance of native habitats, and removal of invasives. If you are interested in joining the committee, or leading the committee, please email Lauren at l.kerwien@gmail.com or Bob (President) at coatsbob@yahoo.com.

A Seed Library Opens at Blacksburg Branch Library

(Lauren Kerwien)

The Blacksburg branch of the Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library is now home to a free seed library! The seed library is located along the back wall of the library, by the young adult section. It includes vegetable and flower seeds (cultivated and native varieties). VNPS-New River Chapter members are encouraged to collect seeds from their gardens this fall and donate them to the seed library! This is a great way to make native plants more accessible to our community. This summer I donated *Baptisia* species seeds from my garden. I waited until the seed pods were dry, split them open, and collected the small seeds inside. I stored the seeds in an envelope and labelled the envelope with the scientific and common names, as well as some descriptors about the plant (height, sun, moisture tolerance). Now is a great time to collect seeds from your garden as summer winds down and seed heads start drying out.

Annual Statewide VNPS Meeting is Coming Soon

(Bob Boehringer)

All VNPS Chapters assemble once a year to elect state officers and approve a budget, and to go on field trips. Dates for this year's meeting are September 19 to 21. We VNPS members in SW Virginia are lucky this year because the conference will be held at the W.E. Skelton 4-H Educational Conference Center, at Smith Mountain Lake in Wirtz. It is only about 1 ½ hours driving time from Blacksburg.

The Friday presentation is by Bradley Simpson who will be talking about *Lessons Learned from trying to do the Right Thing – Managing Woodend Sanctuary*. The Saturday presentation is by Alan Weakley from UNC Chapel Hill talking about *The Flora of the Southeastern United States as a Foundation for Plant Conservation*. Saturday and Sunday include a number of field trips led by experts to areas you may or may not be familiar with.

For more information go to the state VNPS website (vnps.org), click on **Events**, and then **Annual Meeting**.

Last year in August, the board decided to approve financial support to fund grants for up to two local college students to attend the state VNPS annual conference in September. This includes both the student registration fee and hotel accommodations. This year Scarlett Ewing, a Blacksburg high school senior, who is painting a mural of native plants at the Hale Community Garden has been chosen.

**Board Votes to Recognize Certain Members for
Outstanding Service to Our Chapter**
(Brenda Graff and Rosemarie Sawdon)

At the last Chapter board meeting a motion was approved for a new initiative that will recognize one member for special service to our Chapter. No decision was made on how often the board will select someone. There are many members who have made outstanding contributions to our Chapter. The person to be featured this time is Mary Rhoades.

Mary has been a valuable member since 2010 and became a member-at-Large around that time. She became President in 2014, and not only served as President, but also Vice President and Treasurer, as those positions had not been filled. In 2017 a member stepped up to fill the Treasurer role. Mary served two terms. In 2019 she served as Vice President for one term.

One of the highlights of Mary's presidency was organizing, with other chapter members, and hosting, the 2016 Annual State Meeting in the New River Valley. This was a big accomplishment considering the size of the membership at that time. Mary has also been Newsletter Editor since 2014.

In 2003 Mary moved to the Claytor Lake area and lived there for 19 years. For the first fifteen years she volunteered at the State Park and gave many talks and led walks, including a Mother's Day wildflower walk. During her many walks she discovered two native plants: *Houstonia pusilla* (Tiny Bluets) and *Ludwigia leptocarpa* (Angle-stem Water-primrose). Both were new records for Pulaski County.

When president, she wrote a letter to Blacksburg Town Council saying how lucky all residents are that we have the National Forest just ten minutes from town, and that she thought it was time to say "thank you" to National Forest personnel for all their work. She suggested a fitting way to do that would be to declare the last Saturday of June each year as National Forest Appreciation Day; and Town Council unanimously voted for that Proclamation. Every year since then the Chapter has a table at Pandapas Pond in June featuring the various flora or fauna found in the Forest.

Report From First Arborist at the Hahn Garden

(Brittany Christensen)

Editor's Note: Brittany was hired this year by the Hahn Garden. I asked her to write an article including her background and answering some questions I sent her about trees in the garden.

I am an ISA Certified Arborist and was a student gardener at the Hahn Garden from 2017 to 2020. I finished a Master of Forestry degree from Virginia Tech in 2023.

I worked with Dr. Eric Wiseman (Associate Professor of Urban Forestry at VT) for about a year and a half on technical writing projects, VCE publications, and a book for ISA (International Society of Arboriculture) called "Tree Inventories Best Management Practices." What is really cool about my job at the Hahn Garden is that now I get to conduct the garden's first public-facing online inventory. The garden received funding from a donor to get this project started before I joined the team, and I think the fact that I co-wrote the book on tree inventories really made me a great candidate for this job, as well as my ISA certified arborist credential.

We are building our inventory using data from the VT campus tree inventory conducted from August 2017 to March 2018. This is just a starting point, since several trees have been added and removed over the past 8 years. And we are working with a developer to create a public inventory of all the trees, shrubs, and perennials in the garden. I'm excited about the inventory of our plants because I think it will help students and visitors learn more about the variety of unique plants around the world and maybe inspire them to add new plants to their garden. And the website will be searchable to allow visitors to find the flowers in bloom during each month. Also, having a list of all the plants in the garden will make it easier for our students' gardeners to not only perform their job better but to learn more about each plant they care for.

As far as my plans for the garden's trees, I will be responsible for the plant health care of the trees, which includes monitoring for the seasonal pests and diseases, pruning out the dead or diseased branches, pruning young trees for good structure, and monitoring for any nutrient deficiencies. I will also be stepping into a few other roles, such as redesigning spaces in the garden, helping with events at the garden, finding guest speakers for our learn at lunch program, and managing student workers. When it comes to trees, my goal is to monitor each tree's health so I can detect problems early on and keep the trees we do have healthy.

What is the most exotic tree in the garden?

It depends on how you define exotic. We have many tree species from all over the world, all with unique features, form, and my favorite—bark. You can also consider a tree more exotic if it is difficult to find in nurseries, whether that is because it's rare or difficult to propagate. Then there is also the question, can a hybrid species be considered exotic if it is man-made?

My favorite exotic tree in the garden is the Katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*). Its native range is Japan and China, and it has cute heart-shaped leaves and bright yellow fall foliage that releases a sweet fragrance described as burnt sugar or cotton candy when it collects on the ground.

Another really interesting tree we have in the edible garden is the jujube. The small fruit can taste like an apple or a date, depending on when you harvest it. Here's an excerpt from Missouri botanical garden. "*Ziziphus jujuba*, called common jujube, is a small, droopy-branched, somewhat spiny, deciduous tree or large shrub that is native from southeastern Europe to China. It typically matures over time to 15-30' tall. It was first cultivated in China for its fruit over 4000 years ago. Although the fruit from this tree is very popular in China today, it is largely unknown in much of the U.S. The fruit is typically 1" long with a single stone within. When maturing from green to red, each smooth-skinned fruit has a sweet, crisp flesh somewhat reminiscent of an apple. After maturing to red/reddish brown, the fruits wrinkle and take on the appearance (and some say taste) of a date, hence the alternate common name of Chinese date for this plant. Many excellent cultivars exist in China. Fruits may be eaten fresh or may be dried, candied or canned. Numerous prior medicinal uses." <https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=d475>

How many tree species are in the garden?

It's hard to say, mostly because there is a bit of ambiguity when distinguishing between small trees and large shrubs (is it multi-stemmed, what is the height cutoff, etc.), which we have many of! The number of trees is always changing, but the closest estimate is between 400 – 450 trees.

Are there native VA trees in the garden?

Yes, there are lots of Virginia native trees in the garden. Everything planted in our 2-acre meadow is native to the U.S. (not including the invasive weeds that creep in). I'm

not able to give you an accurate estimate of the percent of native trees because I haven't completed the inventory yet. We do have plenty of trees native to Virginia in the garden, and that information will be available on our future public inventory.

Do you have plans to purchase any new trees? (Your wish list)

We will be adding a new Catalpa tree to the shade garden, replacing a birch tree that was cut down a few years ago. I would love to add pawpaw in the edible garden. It is a Virginia native tree that is definitely at the top of my list. Pawpaw has a very interesting fruit with a taste and texture kind of like a banana custard.

Honestly, there isn't a lot of room for shade trees in the garden. We want to preserve lawn space for events and classes, and we want to preserve open views in the meadow, which doesn't leave much space for the large maturing trees, even though these are my favorite. When a large tree is cut down, we do like to replace it with a young tree that will mature to a large size so that we can maintain canopy cover and the shade necessary for the understory plants.

Will all the trees be labeled some day?

We will have a plant inventory that can be accessed on your phone, so garden visitors can click on the map and find out what plant species they are looking at to the cultivar level. There are a few difficulties with plant labels. It can clutter up the space and make it feel less natural, in my opinion. Many plant labels get covered as the plants grow, and the same species of a perennial plant can be scattered in many locations throughout the garden (think of catmint and dianthus, for example). For the plants located further from the walking path, visitors would need to step in the planter beds to read the label, which already is an issue without labels. And of course, there is the cost of ordering new plant labels and replacing the missing ones. Hopefully the new inventory will be a good solution that meets the needs of our visitors.

Report: National Forest Appreciation Day 2025

(Mary Rhoades)

June 28, we had a very successful NFA Day, thanks to our topic—*Insects of the Forest*-- and to modern day advertising by Brenda Graff. She posted the event on 4 websites,

including *Next 3 Days*. And for the first time people were coming to the Pond just for our program! We even had a father and son come from Pulaski. Rosemarie kept a tally, and there were 42 visitors over the 3 hours we were there.

Our regular NFA Day volunteers showed up again: Bob Boehringer, Brenda Graff, Rosemarie Sawdon, and Mary Rhoades. But this year we were joined by two VT students from the Biology Dept. Nick Collins, who is a current student, and Derek Pantel, who graduated this past May. Both are ardent lovers of insects, and they were the stars of our show.

The first child visitor was Violet, who came with her dad and Grandfather. When I found out her name (a native plant), I asked her dad if I could get a photo. The only New River Chapter member who came was David Jenkins. His dog Loki was popular with the children.

Our Content: Nick and Derek came out early and collected insects, so they had live specimens to show everyone. Brenda brought information about how important caterpillars are as food for many birds. She also brought our electronic photo frame which has images of insects on flowers at the Pollinator Garden, and two large posters featuring native flowers. Mary brought a list of the major insect pests and pathogens of the national forest with information provided by Dr. Scott Salom, Forest Entomologist at VT, Dept. of Entomology. Mary made a small poster titled *Home or Forest*. It asked what insects commonly seen in our homes and yards can also be found in the forest.

