New River News

August 2026 **New River Chapter, VNPS**

Programs for Fall Semester

Heads Up! We will be alternating between meeting places this fall. The September and November meetings will be at the Montgomery County Health and Human Services Building (**HHS**) at 210 Pepper Street in Christiansburg, Room 108/109. The October and December meetings will be at the Montgomery Museum (**MM**), 4 East Main Street, Christiansburg. Meetings start at **7 pm**. All meetings will be run with a Zoom component.

September 8. Fatal Attraction: exploring the interaction between mosquitoes and a toxic Appalachian Wildflower

Our speaker will be James Moloney, PhD student in the Department of Biochemistry at VT. Certain plant compounds are essential for mosquito development, but insect/plant interactions are diverse. This talk will feature results from field work by James at Mountain Lake.

Meeting Place: **HHS**, 210 Pepper Street, Christiansburg.

October 13. Plants on the Edge: thriving in extreme environments

Allie Igwe joined the faculty of the Department of Biology at VT in 2024. Her areas of research include plant/microbiome interactions, and soil restoration.

Meeting Place: **MM**, 4 East Main Street, Christiansburg.

November 10. Ferns of Virginia

Jordan Metzgar is Curator of the Massey Herbarium at VT. He will introduce us to ferns found around our state.

Meeting Place: **HHS**, 210 Pepper Street, Christiansburg.

December 8. Member Mingle Party

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 on about how to send in your photos, slides, etc. Bring finger foods to share.

Meeting Place: **MM**, 4 East Main Street, Christiansburg.

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, October 10: Hokie Bugfest at VT from 9 am to 3 pm. This event is held in Squires Student Center and attended by several thousands of people and is a good way to inform the public about our Chapter. If you would like to volunteer, please contact Brenda Graff at graff_brenda@hotmail.com.

Current New River Chapter Board

(Bob Boehringer)

President – Bob Boehringer
Vice President - Vacant
Treasurer – Bruce Grimes
Co-Secretaries – Zari Morehouse and Brenda Graff

Members-at-large - Jennifer Lovern, Beth Umberger, and Rosemarie Sawdon

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).

Fall Field Trips

(Brenda Graff)

Late summer and fall are good times to visit sites to see flowers. If anyone has any suggestions, either to lead or just to suggest a location, contact Brenda Graff (graff_brenda@hotmail.com).

Annual Statewide VNPS Meeting is Coming Soon

(Bob Boehringer)

The annual state meeting of all Chapters will be October 2nd through October 4th in Wakefield, Virginia. Each meeting has excellent speakers Friday and Saturday evenings. There are field trips Saturday and Sunday. The annual meeting is a chance to meet other members from across the state and to learn native plants in a different part of the state. Due to the driving distance to this meeting it is a good idea to carpool. Contact Mary Rhoades if you would like to carpool (mrhoades@vt.edu). For more information go to the state VNPS website (**vnps.org**), click on **Events**, and then **Annual Meeting**.

Board Votes to Recognize Rosemarie Sawdon as the 2026 Member for Outstanding Service to the New River Chapter

(Brenda Graff)

Rosemarie has been extremely active with helping our chapter since 2008. She has been a board member-at-large since 2019 and has been on the grants, membership, and nominating committees for several years.

She is most known for being the first person to volunteer with our many tabling events, i.e., our chapter native plant sale in May, the SEEDS spring festival, Heritage Day in Christiansburg, the NRV garden tour, Hokie Bugfest, and our own National Forest Appreciation Day. She knows her native plants and how to talk to the public about them.

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I believe she is the oldest member in our chapter at the spry age of 89. She hikes and exercises most days, so hopefully our chapter will have many more years with her as a volunteer.

Outside of her work with our chapter, Rosemarie has lived in Blacksburg since 1991. She currently lives in Warm Hearth Village and since 2019 maintains the pollinator garden and monitors the bluebird trail.

She was a member of the NRV Master Gardeners from 2005 to 2012 and served as Secretary for four years. In 2012 she took the Master Naturalist program. Her activities include helping with several pollinator gardens, bluebird trail monitoring, invasive plant removal, and various educational projects including Living with Black Bears in Virginia.

She was always concerned about environmental degradation and began actively protesting while living on Hilton Head in the eighties to protect the forested areas on the Island (a barrier island with a fragile ecosystem) which were being attacked for development.

Her proudest accomplishment was when, as an original member of Virginia Forest Watch, an organization founded to protect old growth forests in the Jefferson National Forest as well as private lands, they worked with the Forest Service, and in conjunction with the Wilderness Society, in 1999 published **Virginia's Mountain Treasures**: **The Unprotected Wildlands of the Jefferson National Forest**, which included 67 areas. This work precipitated the passing by Congress of the Roadless Area Conservation Act. She also served as president of the local chapter of the Sierra Club for eight years.

Rosemarie is also known for her advocacy in protecting Stadium Woods, an old growth forest on the VT campus. She was arrested around 2012 when she was protesting against the athletes parking under the old growth trees in Stadium Woods. She also protested the Mountain Valley Pipeline, helping to feed the tree sitters and taking photos of the destruction being done in Elliston.

Pollinator/Native Plant Gardens Maintained by the New River Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

(Brenda Graff)

The Virginia Native Plant Society (vnps.org) encourages communities and individuals to incorporate native plants into managed landscapes and, when doing so, to maximize the use of wild-type plants. Such an approach provides the most reliable way to support the flora and fauna with which these plant species have coevolved over millennia, to maintain genetic diversity, and to minimize the risks inherent in introducing plants to an ecosystem.

There are plenty of them within the New River valley area, both public and private. Selected examples are listed in our chapter website (including the three below). If you have suggestions to include more in our chapter website, please contact Brenda

Graff at graff_brenda@hotmail.com. If you are interested in creating a pollinator/native garden, view our handout titled "Resources for pollinator gardens" or articles in the Virginia Native Plant Society website.

The New River chapter maintains 3 gardens all within Blacksburg. Volunteers are always welcome to help out with any of these gardens.

VT YMCA thrift store

In the spring of 2021 this native plant demonstration garden was created and planted by our Chapter along with the Plant SW Virginia natives campaign at the North Main street store. The two false blue indigo are spectacular in the spring when they bloom. Rosemarie Sawdon, David Bellangue, and Pat Polentz helped plant the original native plants. Today Brenda Graff and Ann Raridon take care of this small garden.

Warm Heath Village

In 2019, Rosemarie volunteered to maintain the Pollinator Garden which had been established by the Manross family in 2005. The garden is located across from the Village Center and along the walking path. Most of the plants are native, and it includes an active bluebird house. It is small enough for her to be the sole caretaker of it.

SEEDS pollinator garden

It was established in 2008 by Rosemarie Sawdon as part of the SEEDS Blacksburg Nature Center on Wharton Street in Blacksburg. In the spring of 2026, the nature center along with the garden moved to Blacksburg's historic Bennett House & Wong Park, 303 Wilson Avenue. In addition to a new pond, a rain garden has been added to include two pawpaw trees. Brenda Graff and Rosemarie Sawdon are the main workers here, but they can use extra help.



Photo by Rosemarie Sawdon of the SEEDS garden.

From Eagle Scout Project to Community Mural

(Bob Boehringer)

There is a gorgeous mural at the Hale Community Garden in Blacksburg. The mural displays the beauty of 10 native plants. It includes a key for the names, common and scientific, of these flowering natives. Partial funding for this mural came from our Chapter grant funds.

The design and execution of the mural was by the artist Scarlett Ewing, now a college student at Martha Washington in Fredericksburg. Scarlett has always been an artist at heart and has created winning art pieces. Scarlett was also a Scout. Early in her Scouting career Scarlett saw a mural and wanted to create one herself. That goal became the focus of her Scouting when she proposed to create a mural for an Eagle project. As Scarlett points out, an Eagle project is more than a community project. The project is more than creating something. It requires planning and organization to involve others. An Eagle project cannot be something a person does on their own. It is about leadership and this project required a large amount of help from others: school friends, scouts, and members of adult organizations such as Master Gardeners, Virginia Native Plant Society, and Master Naturalists. It was a remarkably large project with hundreds of hours of volunteer time.

The mural is composed of a number of plants that were chosen because they are native plants. Scarlett wanted the mural to reflect the native world around us. The plants that were chosen, of the many that could have been candidates, began with the book **Plant SWVA Natives**. Scarlett looked over the photos looking for forms and colors that would be visually compelling to the viewer. The plants needed to show the wide range of color and form that exist in native plants. Another goal was to introduce people to plants that are lesser known. Spicebush and serviceberry are lesser-known plants that were added to the group of 10 candidates. The white oak is an iconic plant that needed to be on the mural. The brilliant yellow of the tall goldenrod was a must. The passionflower has an intricate form and color. Bee balm completed the mural with its form.

The boards were purchased and prepped for painting. Boards were cut to fit the shed where they would be displayed. Scarlett decided on a paint by numbers technique to coordinate the many people that worked on the painting. Sketches were made to decide on a layout for the mural. The sketches were enlarged to mural size and drawn on the boards. Areas were marked with numbers to indicate what paint color to use. Painting began at the end of summer and ran into the fall. Many days were sunny and warm, but as fall came around there were days of mist and even a few snowflakes that limited the work. Eventually, through the gift of many

volunteer hours, the mural was completed and mounted on the shed at the Hale Community Garden. With the project completed Scarlett submitted her final paperwork for the Eagle project and was awarded the rank of Eagle scout.

Scarlett's ambition is to continue her interest in art and native plants on a smaller scale as the complexities and demands of college are upon her. She would like to add to her own native plant garden when time permits. Scarlett also would like to extend her passion for natives to fellow students. Scarlett noticed a small plot of land on the campus. This plot is a bit overrun by invasives that could be cleared by students in a day. This would remind her fellow students of the tasks each of us can do to make the world a brighter, prettier place. We can all be thankful for the mural that now is at the Hale Community Garden.



Photo by Bob Boehringer: Scarlett working on the panel for columbine and *Liatris*.

Bats in My Backyard

(Carol Schwobel)

It's better than watching a solar eclipse. It is magical and thrilling to sit in the quiet dusk and wait for the bats to appear. Then they come and they circle, swoop and dive until they've gotten their fill of what my backyard has to offer. For years I've been planting to feed the butterflies and bees and all the other pollinators. Now I'm thinking about planting to feed bats! Then I realized that I don't really know what they eat except for mosquitoes, and who wants more of them? Hummmm.

My backyard is a bit of a pocket park. When I sit on my deck with the house behind me, there are white pines on the left, hollies and pear trees in the back, and yellowwood, black walnut, black locust, and oak on the right. In the middle is the pollinator garden. So, what are they eating, anyway? And what do I plant to provide food for them?

All the bats in SW Virginia are insectivores that feed on night-flying bugs including moths, beetles, wasps, flies, mosquitoes, flying ants, and gnats, among other things. They eat from 50 to 100 percent of their weight in insects each night. Assuming it's a little brown bat (yes, that's the common name of a local bat) it will eat 3-8 grams of insects per night. That doesn't sound like much, but at 400-500 mosquitoes per gram, an adult can eat up to 4,000 mosquitoes! That's a lot of mosquitoes! I'd rather not have more mosquitoes, but many of my plants are hosts for moths, and I've seen some really beautiful wasps on my boneset. Additionally, when I go out in the dewy garden in the morning I never fail to see tons of pollinators especially on the late figwort and the giant purple hyssop. A quick search for plants that feed bats turns up the usual suspects you find in a well-stocked pollinator garden: goldenrod, purple coneflower, wild bergamot and New England aster. So, I'm thinking that if you plant a variety of native species, make sure something is blooming from early to late season, then sit back and wait for the bats to come!

There are places you can search online to find more native plants that support the insects that bats eat. Download the **Wildr App** and look under the "learn" tab, then select "Be Night-Friendly." One important thing you can do for night insects is to turn off outside lights you don't need. You can also search here for specific plants and see the number of butterflies and moths the plant supports. The **North Carolina Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox** online will list "wildlife value" under the tab "attributes" for most plants you search for. The **Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center** website will list "benefit" and "value to beneficial insects" to many plants.

Our local online **Draper Springs Nursery and Garden** plant descriptive blurb will include its value to specific insects, and you can order the plants you want while you are there. The best book I have found on attracting insects is ***Pollinators of Native Plants: Attract Observe and Identify Pollinators and Beneficial Insects with Native Plants*** by Heather Holm.

Good Luck and enjoy your increasingly complete and complex ecosystem!