

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

VOLUME 41, NO. 2, MAR-MAY, 2023

American Bladdernut

Staphylea trifolia

By Laura Beaty



AMERICAN BLADDERNUT IN FLOWER. PHOTO BY LAURA BEATY

The American Bladdernut tree has a scientific name with a rhythmical quality: *Staphylea trifolia*, staf-i-LEE-a try-FOH-lee-a. This small, suckering tree or large shrub is found in almost every county in Virginia; in fact, it grows in most of the East Coast, from Southern Ontario into Florida, and well into the Midwest.

It usually measures 8 to 15 feet tall and often grows as a clonal colony. It is easily identified by its bright green leaves with three leaflets (sometimes five). Its grayish brown and sometimes dark green bark is highlighted by white lenticel streaks running lengthwise along its branches.

Upcoming

Margaret Chatham:

The (Native) Flowers that Bloom in the Spring: Ephemerals and More

Thursday, March 9, 7:30-9 pm

By Zoom

You're not alone if you feel that you have to re-learn the names of your favorite flowers every spring. Get a head start this year

Early Spring at Turkey Run

Led by Margaret Chatham

Friday, Mar 24, 9:30-12:30 or 1:30-4:30

A snapshot of spring ephemerals on a short but mostly vertical walk. Choose AM or PM

Spring Ephemerals at Fraser Preserve

Led by Margaret Chatham

Friday, April 7, 9:30-1:30

It can be surprising how different the flowers are just a few miles upstream on the Potomac. This walk also goes down and up, but covers maybe 6 times the distance.

Margaret Couvillion:

Bees as Bioindicators for a Sustainable Future

Thursday, April 13, 6:30-8 pm

By Zoom

NOTE EARLY START TIME!

Meadowood Special Recreation Management Area

Led by Susan Jewell

Sunday, May 7, 9:30-noon

2.5 miles through upland and floodplain in a nice, natural area.

Alexis Dickerson: Potomac Conservancy

Thursday, May 11, 7:30-9 pm

By Zoom

All events are free and open to the public. Walks require preregistration. To receive email notices with walk registration links and other chapter news, send an email to vnps-pot-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Manage your VNPS Membership Online

1. Go to <https://vnps.z2systems.com/>
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Spring Native Plant Sales (an incomplete list)

Tue, Mar 7, 9 am: online ordering opens for Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District sales of packets of 6 woody seedlings; pick-up 3/31 or 4/1. <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/soil-water-conservation/native-seedling-sale>

Earth Sangha is not planning a Spring Open House & Plant Sale this year, but by mid-March, they expect to resume Sunday timed shopping slots for those who want to wander the nursery themselves and any time order for pick-up for those who are willing to order plants from the inventory listing. earthsangha.org

Sat, Mar 25, 8:30 am-2 pm National Arboretum Native Plant Sale, enter at 2400 R St NE, Washington, DC fona.org

Wednesdays, Apr 5, May 3, June 7, etc. 10 am-1 pm VNPS First Wednesday Plant Sales in the propagation beds behind the Horticulture Center at Green Spring Gardens Park. (Cash or check only) vnps.org

Sat, Apr 22, 9 am-3 pm Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Spring Native Plant Sale in the main Morven Park visitor parking lot, 17195 Southern Planter Lane, Leesburg, VA loudounwildlife.org

Sat, Apr 29, 9 am-2 pm Northern Alexandria Native Plant Sale, 1701 N Quaker Lane, Alexandria, VA <http://www.northernalexandriannativeplantsale.org>.

No date yet published for the native plant sale at Long Branch Nature Center, 625 S Carlin Springs Rd, Arlington, VA parks.arlingtonva.us
Last year, plants were only available by preorder at registration.arlingtonva.us

Sat, May 20, 9 am-3 pm Green Spring Garden Day brings in native plant vendors among others. Be sure to visit the VNPS propagation beds for our offerings behind the Horticulture Center (VNPS accepts credit cards as well as cash or check at this sale only). 4603 Green Spring Rd, Alexandria, VA <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/green-spring/events>

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Submissions to *Potowmack News* may be sent to The Editor at vnps.pot@gmail.com

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BLADDERNUT FROM PAGE 1

One might wonder how it manages to wander over such large areas of the country, considering its seed dispersal methods. Oaks, cherries, and many others rely on animals and birds for seed distribution. Maples, cottonwoods and more let the wind carry their seeds into new territories well away from the “mother” trees. The Bladdernut tree has a different way of getting its seeds around.

The Bladdernut tree relies on the “bladder,” an inflated papery capsule or three-compartmented seed pod, to find new territory. This papery origami-like creation is a “floater.” It is not of much interest to wildlife, so the air-tight pod can fall to the ground with seeds safe inside. It begins its travels when rains carry the buoyant pod to a nearby waterway and into new territory where it eventually washes up on a distant stream bank. This distribution system dovetails nicely with Bladdernut’s preference for stream bank habitat. Its dense underground root system helps prevent soil erosion along those banks as it forms thickets. It appears that its successful migration into the Midwest is supported by streams and rivers. It can do well in drier (average) conditions, but it responds negatively to heat, drought and soil compaction. Its widespread presence in North America demonstrates the success of this seed distribution system.

The Bladdernut seed, once free of its pod, must meet a double-dormancy requirement in order to germinate: two to three months of cold weather and the same for warm weather. It usually germinates in its second year.

Much can be said about the seed from a culinary point of view. It can be eaten raw or cooked and has a walnut-type taste. Its sweet edible oil can be used for cooking. It is even used in chocolate chip cookies in place of walnuts. Although the cookies might tempt humans, early emerging pollinators find its flowers more valuable. Reviewing photographs from earlier years, I find the flowers are usually “open for business” around here the first week in April, though the buds begin to swell in mid-March. This blooming period provides for early emerging ground-nesting miner bees, *Halictid* or sweat bees, bumblebees and many others, including the *Syrphid* flies that visit the flower to collect pollen. The attractive drooping clusters of white bells are suspended by pedicels slightly longer than the flowers.

With its edible seeds and double-dormancy, it’s a wonder there are trees available for planting. This is where its growth habit

becomes a useful propagation tool. Its suckering nature makes it possible to remove offshoots from the multi-trunked tree. Offshoots develop their own roots, providing a successful transplant or pot-grown tree. I have two happily growing Bladdernut trees that were removed from a friend’s tree and are proof



**BLADDERNUT BLADDERS, 10/24/22
PHOTO BY MARGARET CHATHAM**

that suckers can go out into the world and find a good life. This Spring, hike woody stream or river banks and you may find the beautiful Bladdernut trees in bloom.



A Closer Look at Sweetgum Balls

Margaret Chatham

Years ago, I picked up a Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) seed ball, and shook some bits of dust out of the open holes behind its points, and thought: “What tiny seeds Sweetgum makes!” There’s no telling how long I might have continued to think these were the seeds of Sweetgum if I hadn’t gotten curious about what the inside of a gum ball looks like.

My Sweetgum, planted thirty-odd years ago from an Arbor Day Foundation bare-root whip, has just started making gum balls. So I took one into my kitchen and cut it open. It was not an easy cut to make. The ball is quite woody — not as hard as a walnut shell, but definitely not interested in coming apart. And it was wet, so when I took a photo of it, the interior structure was hard to make out. So I left it on the counter to dry. Five days later, I looked again, and saw winged seeds had fallen out of it. The seeds are small, only about a centimeter long, with a papery wing reminding one of a miniature maple or ash seed, but ever so much larger and more interesting than the dust I thought was seed.



While I’m thinking of it, that Arbor Day Foundation packet of sample trees taught me my first lesson in the importance of local plant sourcing. I don’t remember all the trees that were in that packet — I know I tossed a Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) because I didn’t think I needed any more of them — and I’m sure that was the source of my Sweetgum, River Birch (*Betula nigra*) and a Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) that are all apparently happy trees, but

the Dogwood (*Cornus florida*) from that packet could never figure out our seasons. It didn’t leaf out at the same time as my indigenous Dogwoods, it kept its leaves into the winter, and died after five years or so. The Dogwoods that were already growing in my woods understand this place, and leaf out, bloom, produce seed and seedlings just as they should.

Correction Re: 2022 Solstice Walk

Article by Katy Johnson in Potowmack News, vol 41 no 1

Katy Johnson sends: Sincere apologies for my misinterpretation of the information from the Serpentine Barrens Conservation Park Operations and Use Guide, mentioned in the article in our last newsletter.

I appreciate the opportunity to drive even deeper and learn even more about such a fascinating place. I am also even more inspired than ever by the community built around the love, learning, and ultimately preserving our Native Plants.

John Parrish offers the following correction to my article. “One correction I need to mention is that page three of the article refers to RTE [Rare, Threatened or Endangered] species listed in the Serpentine Barrens Conservation Park Operation and Use Plan (p.15). The species listed on page 3 of Katy’s article are actually species found across several serpentine barrens in Maryland. Several of these are NOT found at the Travilah site. The RTE list for the Travilah Barrens (Serp. Barrens Cons. Park) is found on pages 16 and 17 of the Operation and Use Plan. The MD DNR ranks and statuses are now out of date but the list shows a broad diversity of uncommon and rare plants found at Travilah. Also a few more RTE species have been found since 2007, including Meads Sedge (*Carex meadii*). The Operation and Use Plan can be found at:

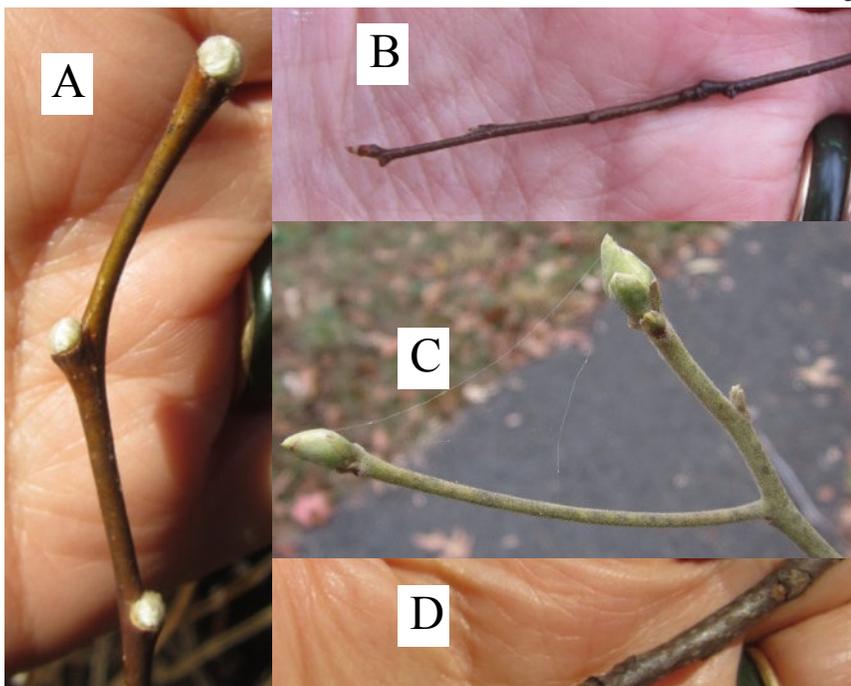
https://montgomeryparks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/SerpBarrensOUP_jul2007.pdf

This is of concern only to people who look solely at the print version of the newsletter. A correction has already been made to the on-line newsletter. - Ed.

More Buds

Most of these photos were taken in December. Where the time makes a difference to the appearance, other dates are noted. Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 *Alnus serrulata*, Smooth Alder
- 2 *Asimina triloba*, Pawpaw
- 3 *Carpinus caroliniana*, American Hornbeam
- 4 *Carya cordiformis*, Bitternut Hickory
- 5 *Carya tomentosa*, Mockernut Hickory
- 6 *Cercis canadensis*, Redbud
- 7 *Dirca palustris*, Leatherwood (1/30/23)
- 8 *Juglans nigra*, Black Walnut
- 9 *Liriodendron tulipifera*, Tuliptree
- 10 *Sassafras albidum*, Sassafras (11/15/22)
- 11 *Staphylea trifolia*, Bladdernut



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Word of the Month: Valvate



Of bud scales: meeting only at the margins, not overlapping. *Flora of Virginia* describes the terminal buds of *Liriodendron tulipifera* (Tuliptree) as flattened, with two valvate scales. Overlapping scales are said to be “imbricate,” like shingles or roof tiles (word of the month in March, 2016). The central twig in this photo was a flowering stem, and bears the core of the seedhead, after all the seeds have dispersed.

Answers to puzzle on page 5: 1-I (why is smooth alder so fuzzy?); 2-G note round (lateral) flower bud & pointed (terminal) leaf bud; 3-B note delicate twig; 4-D often said to be yellow, but doesn't always show that color; 5-J really is a bit fuzzy; 6-E no flower buds here; 7-A swelling & ready to pop; 8-H; 9-K flattened, duckbill buds; 10-C; 11-F the only one here that branches oppositely.