

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

VOLUME 44, NO. 1, JAN-MAR, 2026

Flowering Dogwood

Cornus - oops! Benthamidia florida

By Margaret Chatham



AT FRASER PRESERVE, 4/16/24. ALL PHOTOS FOR THIS ARTICLE BY MARGARET CHATHAM

The taxonomists have been at it again, refining our knowledge of relations among plant species, and thereby changing plant names we've known "forever." This change has been in the wings for a few years, but now it's official: the *Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora* lists no *Cornus* species. Our state flower and tree Flowering Dogwood is now *Benthamidia florida*. Gray Dogwood, Silky Dogwood, and Pagoda or Alternate-leaf Dogwood are now in the genus *Swida*: *Swida racemosa*, *Swida amomum*, and *Swida alternifolia* respectively. Bunchberry, the ground-hugging, high-altitude Dogwood relative, has become *Chamaepericlymenum canadense*. Fortunately, we don't need to worry about memorizing that name, as Bunchberry is only found in four mountain counties in Virginia.

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Upcoming

Charles Smith: Light Eaters and the Mother Tree: Exploring what plants are and are not

Thursday, January 8, 2026, 7 pm

We rely on plants for food, shelter, and many other functions. We learn early that they convert sunlight to energy, but we often remain largely "plant blind;" allowing them to form a backdrop for our lives with little understanding or appreciation. This program will lead us on a journey considering research and discussions over the last fifty years that have sometimes tried to assign plants human qualities, but have also discovered many things plants do that redefine what they are.

By Zoom; watch for registration info.

Walk the winter woods at Fraser Preserve with Margaret Chatham

Friday, Jan 9, 11 am; snow date Monday, Jan 12
Winter tree ID? See what's green? We'll adventure. Limited space: watch for registration info.

Margaret Chatham: Native Ground Covers

Thursday, February 12, 7 pm

Explore some of the options for native ground covers to help shade the roots of your favorite native shrubs and trees and make a soft landing for the caterpillars we hope they're hosting.

By Zoom; watch for registration info.

8th Annual Prince William Native Plant Symposium

Saturday, Feb 14, 9 am - 4 pm

On-line and in person, Verizon auditorium, GMU 10900 University Blvd, Manassas

Keynote speaker Bill Cullina; early bird pricing ends Jan 9

<https://happeningnext.com/event/8th-annual-prince-william-native-plant-symposium-2026-eid1ef0ih38negr> for information and schedule, but you'll need to find your way to Eventbrite to order tickets.

All events are free and open to the public.

Walks require preregistration. To receive email notices about upcoming events, subscribe to our mailing list at <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack> You can also send a blank email to potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io

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Check out the Potowmack Chapter Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/vnpspot>.

Native Plant Finder

Margaret Chatham

Some time back, the question arose of whether anyone still had one of Doug Tallamy's old lists of numbers of Lepidoptera hosted by various plants — numbers that are always moving targets as more research is done and more Lepidoptera are caught in the act of eating more plants. The numbers also change depending on where the plant is and which Lepidoptera are in the neighborhood to use it. As I understand it, this was one of the main reasons those old lists have vanished. The National Wildlife Federation addresses this problem in its Native Plant Finder: nativeplantfinder.nwf.org Here you can put in your zip code and pull up a list of plants native to your area, arranged in order of the number of species of Lepidoptera they host. There are two lists, one for woody plants and one for flowers and grasses.

I tried this recently for my own zip code. The woody list started out pretty much as I expected: *Quercus*, *Prunus*, *Betula*, *Salix*, *Acer*, *Malus*, *Populus*, *Vaccinium*. Some of the numbers were a bit lower than I've seen quoted elsewhere, but I suppose that's to be expected.

The flowers and grasses list surprised me a bit, with strawberry as number two after goldenrods, followed by sunflowers, *Eupatoriums* and friends, violets, and *Hibiscus*, but *Symphyotrichum* didn't show up until the third page of sixteen.

Give this a try and see what's "best" for your yard.

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FLOWERING DOGWOOD CONTINUED FROM P 1

Regardless of what you call it, Flowering Dogwood is a treasure. William Cullina in his *Native Trees, Shrubs, & Vines* calls it “the tree that elevates the [dogwood] clan to the level of horticultural aristocracy.” Michael Dirr in his *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants* calls it “the aristocrat of

whiten to draw attention (and pollinators) to its small cluster of greenish-yellow flowers.

Flowering dogwood offers early spring nectar for bees, or whoever is out looking and can serve as a larval host for over 100 Lepidoptera, including the spring azure butterfly and Cecropia and Polyphemus silk moths. Its bright red fruits feed birds, although in my own yard, I rarely see any fruits, as the squirrels eat them before they ripen. I do get to enjoy its leaves’ reliable dark red fall color, whether there are any fruits or not.

Mature Flowering Dogwood bark is light gray and broken into square blocks, sometimes described as “alligator-skin bark,” but these must be baby alligators in contrast to the full-grown, dark alligators of Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*).

The wood of Flowering Dogwood is pinkish and very hard, so that one folk etymology for the name dogwood says it comes from the wood’s use as shuttle dogs in power looms. The name is actually much older than



native flowering trees, often overplanted but never becomes obnoxious.”

Flowering Dogwood is a small tree, only reaching 20 to 30 feet in height, so its flowers, unlike those of, say, the Tulip Tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), are low enough for us to appreciate. Its branches are mostly horizontal, curving upward at the tips, giving it a graceful structure throughout the year. In the winter,

you can clearly see where it is planning to bloom. Flower buds are large, onion-dome shaped, and light gray, as opposed to the smaller, dark, reddish leaf buds. The portion of the bracts that protect flower buds through the winter become the in-curved tips when the bracts extend and



power looms, but the wood has been used for many small items like shuttles, mallets and handles that need to stand repeated shocks. My husband enjoyed carving wooden whistles from it: it was slow work to carve, but could be sanded to a very satisfying sheen.

Flowering Dogwood is native from Massachusetts to Florida, and west as far as Ontario and Texas. Virginia Tech's register of Virginia's trees lists its average lifespan as 125 years, and gives no suggestion as to a maximum age. Long life does depend on avoiding Dogwood Anthracnose Fungus (*Discula destructiva* Redlin), overwhelming Powdery Mildew, and summer drought stress. These problems can largely be solved by planting Flowering Dogwood in places with partial shade and good air circulation, and keeping their roots cool with a good mulch ("green mulch" of native ground cover is fine), and perhaps some deep watering when drought really pinches. And despite the current advice against using Flowering Dogwood as a street tree, there are numbers of trees planted before Dogwood Anthracnose arrived here that still survive and offer their beauty to all who drive by.

A Job Well Done

By Donna Murphy

Bobby Bauer is an active member in the Potowmack Chapter in spite of living in Maryland. He fights the beltway each week to volunteer at the propagation beds at Green Spring Gardens from April to October. He has done this every year since retiring from a job in IT at the National Institutes of Health in 2015 (and joining VNPS). Bobby is an avid gardener, with a special interest in ferns and edible native fruit – think Pawpaw. He regularly shares his bounty of Pawpaw fruit with the propagation crew, and he has been a reliable source of donations of various ferns and Pawpaw seeds and seedlings for our sales, where he volunteers as knowledgeable salesman and educator for our customers.

Bobby is a fine furniture maker, who has used these skills to enrich our potting facilities. In 2024, he built two new tables for potted plants to replace tables that aged out. And in 2025, he designed and built four large, beautiful, new, wooden bins for storing our empty pots, shown at right. With Alan Ford's help, he assembled them onsite and clocked 21 hours of design and prep work at home.

Bobby is also a cyclist and hiker at home and on vacations to Europe. He has done several long-distance hikes in Scotland: West Highland Way and Rob Roy Way, along with Hadrian's Wall in England. On separate trips he traveled to Scotland and Germany to build two custom-made rocking chairs (which he specializes in), and both times he was invited to stay as a guest during his visit.

He recently traveled to Italy twice, visiting Florence, Rome, Naples and Amalfi Coast; and he's planning another trip this spring. Not surprisingly, he likes to cook Italian food and enjoys baking bread.

We wish him well on his travels, and with much appreciation for him and his work, we look forward to working with Bobby again next year during the gardening season.



PHOTO BY DONNA MURPHY

Evergreens — or Not

Not all conifers are evergreen, though I only managed to fit one deciduous conifer into this set. All of these are local but not all are native: an asterisk indicates a plant not native to Northern Virginia. Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 **Cedrus deodara*, Deodar Cedar
- 2 *Juniperus virginiana*, Eastern Red Cedar, young growth
- 3 *Juniperus virginiana*, Eastern Red Cedar, mature growth
- 4 **Picea abies*, Norway Spruce
- 5 **Picea pungens*, Colorado Blue Spruce
- 6 *Pinus strobus*, White Pine
- 7 *Pinus taeda*, Loblolly Pine
- 8 *Pinus virginiana*, Virginia Pine
- 9 *Taxodium distichum*, Bald Cypress
- 10 *Taxus canadensis*, American Yew
- 11 *Thuja occidentalis*, Eastern Arborvitae
- 12 *Tsuga canadensis*, Eastern Hemlock



A



B



C



D



E



F



J



G



H



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K



L

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Word of the Month: Bract



A small leaf or scale subtending an inflorescence or a single flower (as in Flowering Dogwood and many composites) to which *Flora of Virginia* adds, "In conifers, one of the primary appendages of the cone axis in the axils of which are borne the ovuliferous scales." Photos show a white pine (*Pinus strobus*) cone and



one of its bracts with its ovuliferous scale.— Margaret Chatham

Answers to puzzle on page 5: 1-G, bundles of many short needles; 2-L prickly!; 3-F; 4-D individual square needles growing in all directions, identifiable by its drooping twigs; 5-A, white stripe on each square needle; 6-J a challenge to photograph countable bundles of five needles; 7-H well, it's native not very far away, and much planted; long needles mostly in bundles of three; 8-C, short, sharp twisted needles in bundles of two, pioneer tree that gets shaded out by our taller deciduous trees; 9-E this is the one here that loses its soft, flat needles; 10-B, flat needles growing horizontally; 11-I; 12-K, shorter flat needles growing horizontally.