

# POTOWMACK NEWS

*Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society*

VOLUME 44, NO. 2, MAR-MAY, 2026

## Leatherwood

*Dirca palustris*

By Margaret Chatham



2/24/23. ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ISSUE BY MARGARET CHATHAM

Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris*) is a slow-growing shrub or miniature tree for moist shade or part shade. Its branches are amazingly flexible and difficult to break, which may explain why it always has an attractive shape and never needs pruning. Of course, it really helps that the deer completely ignore it, at least in my deer-full yard. It is the only local member of the Thymelaeaceae, which iNaturalist calls the Stringbarks family. William Cullina reports in his book *Native Trees, Shrubs, and Vines* that its bark was used as bowstrings by Native Americans. In the winter, its twigs have an unusual knobby look, thickening below each bud. As seen above, it blooms very early in the spring. At full extension, its leaves are light green, more yellow than blue, smooth-edged, oval with a blunt point. Its fruits are oval drupes, 1/3 inch long, that hide among the leaves and nearly match their color, then disappear completely as they drop soon after ripening in the summer. William Cullina says the seeds are hydrophilic (intolerant of dry storage), and unlike most seeds that grow encased in a fleshy fruit, they germinate best if planted with the fleshy fruit intact. NWF's native plant finder ([nativeplantfinder.nwf.org](https://nativeplantfinder.nwf.org)) lists only 2 caterpillars that use *Dirca palustris* as a host plant, but one of these, Oystershell Metrea, uses nothing else around here. Plant for the specialist insects!

## UPCOMING

**Sam Droege: 150 Years of Changes in the Bee Populations of the Washington, DC, Region: the role of native plants**

Thursday, March 12, 7 pm

No one knows our local bees better than Sam Droege!

By Zoom; <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>.

**Chapter Quarterly Social at Green Spring**

Sunday, March 22, 1-4 pm

Friends old and new check out the propagation beds before our first plant sale on April 1 (No fooling!)

<https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Early Wildflowers at Turkey Run** with Margaret Chatham

Friday, March 27, 10 am or 1 pm

They come and go so quickly! Limited space: watch for registration info. <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Spring Wildflowers at Ball's Bluff** with Marijke Gate

Sunday, April 5, 10 am - noon

Twinleaf! Shooting Star! Walking sticks recommended.

Limited space: <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Jenny Meyer: Hidden in Plain Sight: Carex on the Northern Virginia Landscape**

Thursday, April 9, 7 pm

Grass Bunch leader Jenny Meyer shows some of the sedges the Grass Bunch looks for.

By Zoom; <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Nature Journaling with Jen Brown**

Friday, Apr 10, 10 am - noon

Monthly, 2nd Friday thru October. Lake Accotink. Space limited; <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Wildflowers at Lake Accotink** with Su Jewell

Saturday, April 18, details TBA. Limited space: watch for registration info. <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Trillium Trek at Thompson WMA** with Alonso Abugattas

Sunday, May 3, 9 am-1:30 pm

Great White Trilliums, plant folklore, and more. Limited space: <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

**Jim McGlone: Tree Rings, Martian Canals, SW Archeology, and the Hockey Stick**

Thursday, May 14, 7 pm

How did a dispute over the origin of Martian canals lead to a new science that improved our understanding of ancestral pueblo people and climate change, among other things?

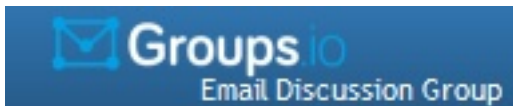
By Zoom; <https://vnps.org/potowmack/events>

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Subscribe to our Potowmack Chapter email discussion group to receive and send email about native plants in our area including questions, answers, and discussions. You don't have to be a VNPS member and there are no ads. Over 350 members strong! Just send a blank email to [potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io](mailto:potowmack+subscribe@vnps.groups.io). Visit <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack> to look around.



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

## VNPS-Pot Propagation Crew

Margaret Chatham

It's getting close to that time of year when the Potowmack Chapter Propagation Crew shifts from winter doldrums to high gear. With native plant sales scheduled for 10 am-1 pm the first Wednesday of the month every month from April through October, plus Green Spring Garden Day on May 16, there's a lot of work to do in March. For a guess, we'll start March 11, meeting Wednesday mornings at the propagation beds behind the Horticulture Center at Green Spring, sorting out the plants left over from last year, mixing potting soil, potting up plants ordered from MidAtlantic Natives (some of this may take place at Laura Beaty's yard), donations from members' yards, and extras from the propagation beds, taking down last year's dead stalks, identifying, counting and labeling. What have I left out? Must be something.

If you are free on Wednesday mornings and would like to take part in the action, join us! There's no better way to learn native plants than to see them from seeds to producing seeds, roots, stems, leaves, buds, and flowers. The company is friendly and the snacks are good.

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Submissions to *Potowmack News* may be sent to The Editor at [potowmack@vnps.org](mailto:potowmack@vnps.org)

Potowmack Chapter  
Virginia Native Plant Society  
P. O. Box 5311  
Arlington, VA 22205

<http://www.vnps.org/potowmack>

# VNPS Propagation Crew's Favorite Spring Wildflowers

Well, some of the propagation crew, anyway: not everyone could choose a favorite. Here are some who did. — Ed.

**Donna Murphy:** My favorite spring wildflowers are Common Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*), also known as Quaker Ladies and Azure Bluets. They are found in forests, woodlands, clearings,

lawns, road banks, and other disturbed habitats.

Often rooted in moss, they commonly occupy part of a plant community that was best described as a "Freedom Lawn" by Rod Simmons. Rod defined Freedom



Lawns in his 2016 presentation on "[Best Management Practices for Lawn Care](#)" at the 2016 Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources Symposium:

"[Freedom Lawns] require very little maintenance as opposed to fertilized and chemically treated traditional lawns... [they serve as] refugia for specialized, mostly native vegetation, including mosses and lichens, and wildlife that require such conditions... [in] places where the forest understory was removed long ago and maintained as such, but were not farmed; hence the native soils, soil micro-organisms, and seedbank for diminutive native grasses and wildflowers are retained."

Bluets' tiny, delicate flowers spring up from their small rosettes of spatulate leaves, which are evergreen or semi-evergreen, depending on how far north the plants grow. (Their range covers the whole eastern half of the continent.) The flowers are light blue to violet, and sometimes white, with a yellow center. Offering both nectar and pollen as floral rewards, the flowers attract Little Carpenter bees (*Ceratina spp.*), Green Metallic bees and other Halictid bees, bee flies (*Bombyliidae*), and small butterflies such as the Meadow Fritillary. Bluets are host plants for caterpillars of the Spotted Thyris moth, *Thyris maculata*, a tiny diurnal species with a half-inch wingspan, active during sunny, warm days.

*Houstonia* is a member of the Madder Family, *Rubiaceae*, along with seven other genera (mostly small plants) that are native to Virginia, including *Cephalanthus*, Buttonbush; *Diodia*, Buttonweed; *Galium*, Bedstraw, Cleavers, Woodruff; *Mitchella*, Partridge-berry; and several more that aren't so well known.

I once grew bluets in a large hypertufa pot, where the rosettes massed together into considerable colonies before dying out over time. According to the *Flora of the Southeastern United States*, 2025 Edition, bluets dislike competition, even among themselves, apparently. Growing wild outside of pots, they do

tend to disappear from year to year and pop up elsewhere in more preferred, spacious conditions.

One early morning in April years ago, I visited the picnic area next to the parking lot at Runnymede Park in Herndon. I had been there before and knew the picnic area was a remarkable Freedom Lawn with sedges, poverty oatgrass, pussytoes, even some tiny rushes, and yes, bluets, to name a few. It was sunny, but the picnic area lay in the shade of the tall trees scattered about the "lawn." In a convergence of commonplace conditions often missed, (time of year, time of day, sun and shade, soil moisture), a particularly lovely landscape of tiny blue flowers was revealed and seemed to glow with an inner light. I had never seen such an intense display of bluets and haven't since.

**Ginny McNair:** What comes to mind as a favorite flower is Spring Beauty, *Claytonia virginica* or *C. caroliniana*. What started out 25 years ago as a narrow line on two edges of our property has spread into our side and back yards and now provides large swaths



of white to pale pink specks throughout these sections of our lawn. We attribute this, in part, to not using pesticides or fertilizers and holding off on our monthly mowing until the display is over.

Their fleshy grass-like leaves and multi-flowered stalks remain short, but tall

enough to just poke up above the grass. Each petal has pink parallel lines which serve as guidelines to draw the pollinators into the nectar. This petite plant blooms continuously for about a month, each flower lasting up to a week, and only opening when the sun shines to protect their pollen, so the size, shape and hue of these lawn specks can differ hour by hour.

While the flower is an important nectar source for over 20 species of bees and flies, one of these bees is dependent (obligate) on it. The tiny 1/3" long, namesake Spring Beauty Miner (*Andrena erigeniae*) depends on Spring Beauty nectar and pollen for itself and its progeny. Once flowering stops, the bee dies leaving its eggs laid in balls of pollen, overwintering until next spring, hatching in time to fertilize next year's Spring Beautys.

**Marilyn Drucker:** I also have several favorites, but the first one that comes to mind is *Phlox divaricata*. It produces such a



nice upright, showy cluster of pale lavender or pale blue flowers. Although it looks so delicate, it is tenacious and can be transplanted somewhat easily, but it spreads slowly. I think it starts blooming in March, but the flowers last for quite a while going into

April and maybe May? It likes its woodland setting, but I've been able to move it around to a setting closer to my house so I can enjoy it daily.

**Linda Knutsen:** It's hard to choose, but I'll have to say either eastern red Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) or blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium coelestinum*). Columbine because I grew up in Colorado, and the fascinating shape and delicacy of the inner chambers of that state's blue columbine was my favorite. Then we moved here, and I love even more the red-orange-yellow of our native variety...orange being my favorite color. And I'm new to the adorable, tiny, cheerful and short-lived blue blooms of the blue-eyed grass. I can't wait to see them both appear!



**Margaret Chatham:** My favorite wildflower is often whichever one I'm looking at, but I have to make sure Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) is included here with its perky, evergreen leaves, so low to the ground that the deer ignore them, fragrant pairs of starry flowers in May, that become orange-red fruits in the fall that are perfectly edible but so lacking in flavor that some may linger on the plant even until the next year's flowers bloom.



**Noreen Hannigan:** I'm sure I'm not the only person who hesitates to name a favorite spring flower, but when asked to, I thought I needed to come up with an angle on the subject. After a few minutes, I remembered (bear with me for a moment) how I used to love [Asian] bleeding hearts (*Lamprocapnos spectabilis*, formerly *Dicentra spectabilis*) before I became a convert to native plants. My mother loved them and had a patch of them in her garden. She gave me some, and I had them, too, for years. Back then we didn't know better. Then I learned a thing or two about the world around me (literally) and dug them up to make way for local

ecotype natives. (If my mom were still alive, she'd understand.)

A genus of native spring wildflowers that remind me of bleeding heart (and have therefore replaced it in my sentiments) are the *Dicentras*: Dutchman's breeches (*Dicentra cucullaria*) and squirrel corn (*Dicentra canadensis*). I love their delicate leaves



and their upside-down-looking flowers. Any flower that's visited by bumblebees is entertaining to watch as the bumblebees force apart the petals and wrestle their way in for the nectar. Of the two, I think I like Dutchman's breeches just a tiny bit more because of the "pantaloons." I know that all the books say they look like breeches hanging on a wash line, but to me they look like the Dutchmen wearing them are joyously doing cartwheels in the air.

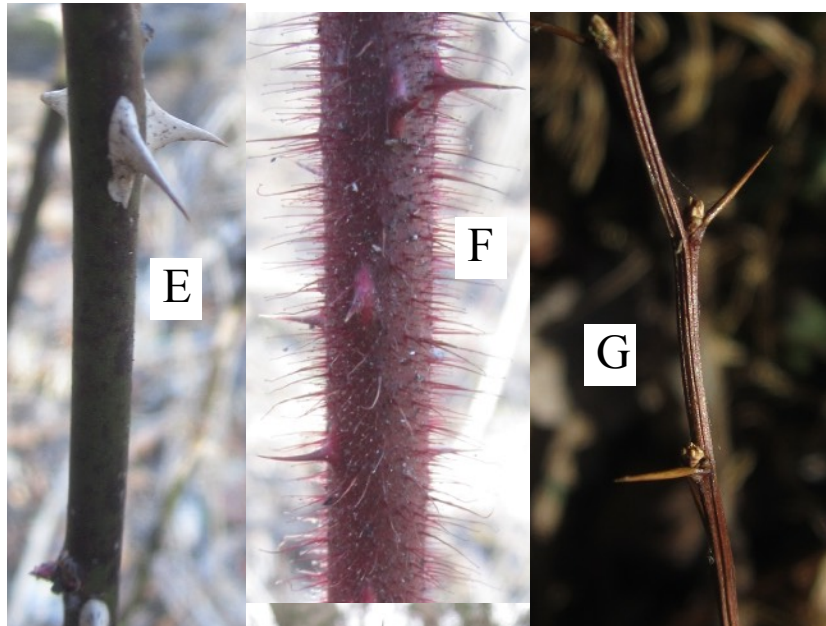
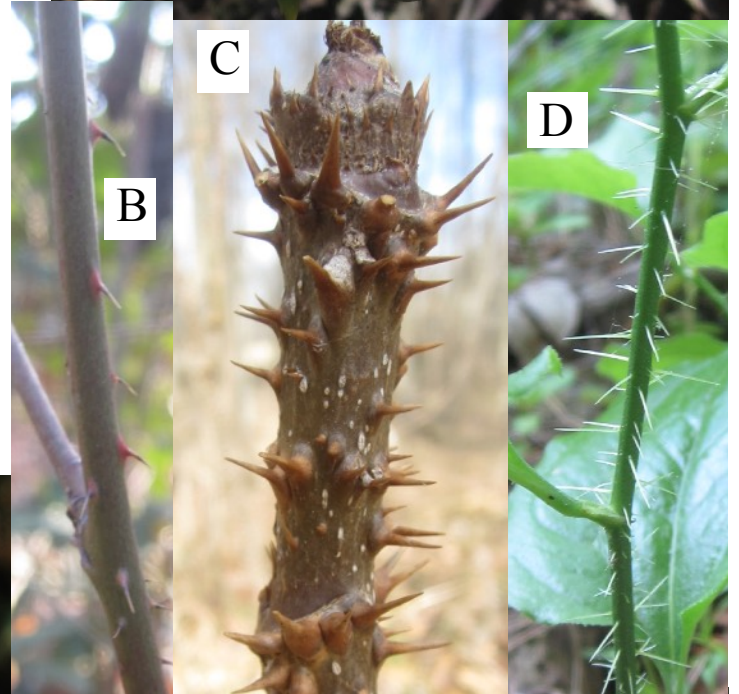
**Louis Nichols:** I always look forward to seeing my Mayapple shoots come up in the spring. The large, umbrella-like, spotted leaves give a tropical, almost rainforest look to my garden. If you are lucky enough to have your garden on a small hill as mine is, then the white flowers which are underneath the leaves are really easy to see. If your garden is not on a hill, then you may have to lift the leaves to see them, but it is really worth the effort. Mayapple spreads quickly from the roots (rhizome?) and spreads out in patches from the original planting. It fills in any spaces that it can, but is not really a bully. It is easy to dig up and share. The flowers turn into attractive fruits that turn bright yellow and there are differing opinions about whether they are edible. You can gather the seeds and plant Mayapple from seed or just let it spread from the roots. We are lucky they grow well on most of the east coast. [Ed. note: Box turtles eat the fruit & disperse the seeds.]



## Thorns, Prickles and Spines

Not that you care which is which when they're stabbing you, but thorns are modified twigs, prickles are sharp features of a plant's bark or epidermis, and spines are modified leaves or stipules, growing from beneath the epidermis. Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 *Aralia spinosa*, Devil's Walking Stick
- 2 \**Berberis thunbergii*, Japanese Barberry
- 3 *Crataegus* sp., Hawthorn
- 4 *Gleditsia triacanthos*, Honey Locust
- 5 \**Maclura pomifera*, Osage Orange
- 6 \**Rosa multiflora*, Multiflora Rose
- 7 *Rubus flagellaris*, Dewberry
- 8 *Rubus occidentalis*, Black Raspberry
- 9 *Rubus pensilvanicus*, Pennsylvania Blackberry
- 10 \**Rubus phoenicolasias*, Wineberry
- 11 *Smilax hispida*, Bristly Greenbriar
- 12 *Smilax rotundifolia*, Common Greenbriar



## POTOWMACK NEWS

Virginia Native Plant Society  
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## Word of the Month: Hydrophilic



Literally “water loving,” describing seeds that die if they dry out too thoroughly before being planted. This is why you give your acorns a float test before planting: ones that float have passed the point of no return. Shown at left, unusually colorful acorns of Chestnut Oak (*Quercus montana*) and much smaller Willow Oak (*Q phellos*) acorns. Seeds of many spring wildflowers with elaiosomes to encourage ant dispersal such as Spring Beauties (*Claytonia*

*virginiana*) and Bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*) are hydrophilic. Some other plants with hydrophilic seeds are American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*), Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) and Pawpaw

(*Asimina triloba*).— Margaret Chatham

Answers to puzzle on page 5: 1-C, prickles, as designated by *Flora of Virginia*; 2-G, prickles, sometimes three-pointed; 3-H, thorns; 4-I, thorns (to keep from being eaten by ground sloths) Digital Atlas of the Virginia Flora is uncertain whether this is native to Virginia or not; 5-L, thorns; 6-E, prickles; 7-K, prickles; 8-J, prickles; 9-B, prickles; 10-F, prickles; 11-D, prickles; 12-A, prickles.