

POTOWMACK NEWS

Potowmack Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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Native Alternatives to English Ivy

By Margaret Chatham



4/9/20. PACKERA AUREA UNDER A RED MAPLE. ALL PHOTOS IN THIS ISSUE BY MARGARET CHATHAM

In the bad old days, English Ivy (*Hedera helix*) was considered an easy, low maintenance ground cover for shady or steep locations where growing and mowing turf grass was difficult. These days, even those least aware of the benefits of native plants can see some of the downsides of English Ivy, as it spreads through our landscape, sending runners into yards where it was never invited, sheltering rats, climbing trees, fences, and walls. Once it is off the ground, the vine matures, often changing the shape of its leaves. The mature vines flower and set seed that birds eat and then plant wherever they go. The vines hold moisture next to trees' bark, encouraging rot. Their evergreen leaves on spreading branches catch the winter winds when deciduous trees aren't expecting the pressure, encouraging blow-down.

Now, many of us are trying to rectify the sins of the past, cutting English Ivy off trees and grubbing it out of our yards, and wondering what to plant in its place. There are many possible native alternatives to English Ivy, depending on site conditions and landscape goals. *Packera aurea*, Golden Ragwort, with its evergreen basal leaves, spreading habit, shade tolerance, deer resistance, and fragrant yellow spring flowers is willing to move in where English Ivy has been removed — perhaps too willing, though it is fairly easy to pull up excess plants and deadheading will keep its floating seeds from wandering everywhere.

IVY REPLACEMENTS CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

UPCOMING

Tree Identification Walk at Bon Air Park led by Leeanna Pletcher

Saturday, June 6, 10 - 11:30 am

Learn about common Virginia native trees and how to identify them using the Virginia Department of Forestry's identification guide. Participants will receive a website link to the pdf version to use on your phone. We will walk along flat paved paths and focus on the leaves and bark of 12 species. We will cultivate connection with each other and nature and enjoy a beautiful park. Limited space; registration is required.

Nature Journaling with Jen Brown

Friday, June 12, 10 am - noon

Monthly, 2nd Friday thru October. Lake Accotink. Space limited; registration is required.

Chapter Quarterly Social at Runnymede Park in Herndon

Sunday, June 14, 1-4 pm

Every site has its own suite of native plants. Friends old and new explore these woods and meadows. No registration needed.

Huntley Meadows Early Summer Walk with Alonso Abugattas

Sunday, June 21, 10 am-12:30 pm

Learn lore, ethnobotany, and natural history of early summer plants and the wildlife that depend on them. Space limited; registration is required.

Ferns of Riverbend Park with Kit Sheffield

Friday, July 17, 9-11 am

Learn about the identification, evolutionary history, and myriad reproductive strategies of ferns on a walk through Riverbend Park's varied habitats. Our walk will cover less than three miles on natural surface trails that are mostly shaded but with some open areas. Space limited; registration is required.

Grass Class with the VNPS Grass Bunch

Saturday, August 29, 3 pm

Hands-on introduction to some common grasses, native and introduced, followed by a walk in Riverbend's meadow to see some where they grow. No experience needed. Space limited; registration required.

All events are free and open to the public.

Event information and registration:

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

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1. Go to <https://vnps.app.neoncrm.com/login>
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Join our Email Discussion Group

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. Visit <https://vnps.groups.io/g/potowmack> to look around.



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

Grasses, Up Close and Personal

Jenny Meyer

If there's no substitute for hands-on experience when it comes to learning the wild flowers, that is doubly true for the often-overlooked grasses.

If you'd like to begin learning the grasses, we'd like to show you real specimens, up close and in person. At Grass Class, Saturday, August 29 starting at 3 pm, members of the VNPS Grass Bunch will introduce you to specimens of roughly 20 species, both natives and some common non-natives that you will find growing all over the Northern Virginia landscape.

For the first part of the class, close examination of specimens will get you oriented toward grass structures and vocabulary. Then we'll take a walk through the meadow at Riverbend Park to observe some of the same species in the field.

This class is free and open for all, but attendance is limited due to its hands-on nature, so pre-registration is required. Register under events on the Potowmack Chapter part of vnps.org.

What is the Grass Bunch? Just a bunch of VNPS members who want to figure out how to identify grasses, sedges, and rushes. None of us started out knowing much. We meet more or less every other Thursday morning to wander around different parks, trying to identify what we see. Definitely not a fast-moving hiking group! If that sounds like your cup of tea, send an email to meyerjen@gmail.com to request that your name be added to our notification list. We'll look forward to meeting you in the field.

"A child said, What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands; How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is, any more than he."

-- Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

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Submissions to *Potowmack News* may be sent to The Editor at potowmack@vnps.org

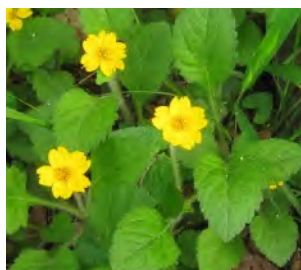
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IVY REPLACEMENTS CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Here are some more native groundcovers for shade or part shade:

Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) is a very low, slow-growing evergreen “subshrub” with shiny leaves and paired white flowers in May that become single orange-red fruits in fall. The fruits are edible but tasteless, and may last on the plant long enough to overlap with next year’s flowers.



Green and Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum* var. *brevistolon*) is another low-growing, evergreen groundcover with larger leaves, yellow spring flowers, but no showy fruit. It spreads in the manner of strawberries, with a bit of space between basal rosettes.

Creeping Phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*) sends up 6” stalks with pale blue-violet flowers in the spring from a mat of low, evergreen leaves. In my yard, this unfortunately puts the flowers at the perfect height to be eaten by deer or rabbits or somebody, though the leaves are usually untouched.

Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*) is another plant my deer won’t let me enjoy. They find its evergreen leaves and spring flower spikes as attractive as I do, but if your yard is safe from deer, this may be the plant for you.

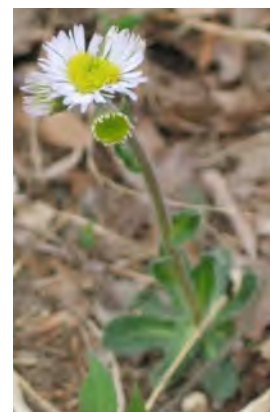


Wild Stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*) blooms better with a bit of sun, but its low, succulent, evergreen leaves will grow in shade, in shallow soil, or wherever they don’t get walked on.

Wild Ginger (*Asarum canadense*) is a low, spreading, deciduous groundcover that requires shade and likes moisture. Its ground-level flowers are the only way to distinguish between variety *canadense* with straight lobes and var. *reflexum* with curled tips. Some authorities now recognize *A. reflexum* as a separate species, which is of interest because it is the one we have in Fairfax and

Arlington Counties, but *Flora of Virginia* does not recognize it as a species (yet?)

Robin’s Plantain (*Erigeron pulchellus*) also makes an evergreen mat of basal leaves with spring flower stalks up to 2’ tall. Its flowers are much like those of the fleabanes, but with pale lavender ray flowers. It grows in part shade to full sun, and spreads by stolons.



White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricata*) makes a more diffuse evergreen ground cover than others suggested here, but is the only late-summer to early fall bloomer of the bunch. Its 6” to 3’ blooming height is fairly modest for one of our asters — not that I’ve ever seen it reach more than 18” or so.

Sedges We have many woodland sedges that can make nice groundcovers for shady places. Most sedges grow in expanding clumps, but a large clump can be fairly easily divided to spread them around. Two fairly fine-grained sedges that will spread by themselves are *Carex pennsylvanica* (Pennsylvania Sedge) and *C. woodii* (Wood’s Sedge). Notable clumping sedges include *Carex plantaginea* (Seersucker Sedge) and *C. platyphylla* (Broadleaf Sedge): both have wide leaves and stay fairly low. For a finer, grassier texture, try *C. radiata* (Eastern Star Sedge) for wet places or *C. rosea* (Rosy Sedge) for dryer sites. Also fairly low is *C. laxiculmis* (Spreading Sedge) with bluish leaves. Somewhat taller and mid-textured, very common clumping sedges (which means they’re easy to grow around here, or that they may arrive on their own) are *C. amphibola* (Eastern Narrow-leaved Sedge) and *C. blanda* (Eastern Woodland Sedge).

Ferns can also make good shade groundcovers, of varying heights, but like the sedges, most will not spread far on their own. Smallish, spreading ferns (none evergreen) include New York Fern (*Amauropelta noveboracensis*, whose genus used to be *Parathelypteris*, and before that *Thelypteris* — how you’ll find its scientific name listed depends on how old your reference book is), Sensitive Fern (*Onoclea sensibilis* — it’s a very hardy fern, only sensitive to frost), Hay-Scented Fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*), and Broad Beech Fern (*Phegopteris hexagonoptera*). Ostrich Fern (*Matteuchia struthiopteris*) sends out underground runners and pops up additional clumps of fronds, but I consider it too tall to be called a groundcover. None of our local evergreen ferns spread very far on their own, but Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) will gradually grow into a large enough clump to be dividable. Christmas fern is our most common fern because it’s happy to grow in many places.

Potowmack Chapter Survey, Results and More Questions

Margaret Chatham

In April, a subcommittee of the Potowmack Chapter Board sent out a survey to everyone it had email addresses for, asking how they have participated in VNPS-Pot events, what they have gotten most value out of, and suggestions for future programs and events. We received 64 responses, a tidy 10% response rate. Of these, 41 said they'd attended a Zoom program; 38 said they'd attended a plant sale; 12 had been to an in-person meeting (one complained of lack of health mitigations at in-person meetings); 11 went on a guided plant walk; 10 came to our annual meeting; 3 attended member get-together; 2 are propagation volunteers; and one each mentioned an invasive plant removal and reading the newsletter.

What people said they appreciated most pretty well matched their participation, with many mentioning the boon of being able to view Zoom meetings without evening travel, or at a later date. More people said they liked the guided walks than have yet found a walk that they could attend.

As the person in charge of setting up those Zoom programs, I pay special attention to the suggestions for topics. Note here that speakers are already lined up for this September (Judy Gallagher on Milkweeds and the insects that use them); October (Laura Greenleaf on Dark Sky concerns); November Annual Meeting (Grass Bunch history and lessons learned); January not confirmed, but hope Charles Smith will continue to usher us into the new year; and February (Liz Train on the Northern Virginia Bird Alliance's Wildlife Sanctuary Program).

Of course, everyone phrases things differently in making suggestions, but the general topic in greatest demand was garden design with natives/ companion planting/ basic gardening methods/ aggressive natives to avoid/ container and small space gardening with native plants. This melds into interest in what the individual can do to improve environmental health, rebuild a forest after invasives are removed, create a meadow, propagate local ecotype natives, improve drought tolerance, plant to attract certain birds or insects. Other topics of wide interest are various subsets of native plants; ecosystem services they provide; invasive plant identification & removal; insects, friend and foe; soils and what lives in them; dealing with climate change and too many deer.

Several people said they enjoyed the showing of The Extraordinary Caterpillar and wanted more of the same. This was a one-off opportunity, not likely to be repeated — but each of us can poke around on YouTube for the talks of your choice. I especially recommend this for the person who requested that we bring in Doug Tallamy: we can't afford him! But he has numerous talks available to you at your leisure on YouTube.

Then there were numerous singular suggestions, requesting citizen science opportunities (try iNaturalist, eBird, etc.); edible plants and food forests; ecology of parasitic and hemiparasitic plants; trees & their diseases; paleobotany; children's programs and "anything for parents of young children." Plant of the year is covered in the state newsletter, which came out after the survey closed.

The Member Survey is active again; please add your own comments and suggestions at <https://form.jotform.com/260505313881049>.

More to the point for me personally, if you have any suggestions of speakers you'd like to hear address our membership, please send their names, fields of expertise, & contact info to me: margaret.chatham@verizon.net. We offer a \$150 honorarium for speakers, which some choose to donate to their chosen organization.

And for those who would like to participate more: welcome! To join the Propagation Crew, just show up at the propagation beds at Green Spring on a Wednesday morning after 10 am and we'll work you in. We're always preparing for the next first Wednesday plant sale. One of our problems at the moment is that we have no committee chair: anyone interested in the position? Contact me as above or Donna Murphy (d@mmurphy.net) or Alan Ford (amford@acm.org). Not available on Wednesday mornings? Once upon a time, there was also a Saturday morning propagation work session. This lapsed when our Saturday morning leader moved away, but could be reinstated if there were someone willing to lead it. And especially through the summer, we need people to water the plants in pots in between Wednesdays. If that interests you, contact Donna.

We have several Committee Chair positions open and waiting for someone who is interested. In addition to the propagation & plant sales position, there are openings for Education, Publicity, and Social Media. Maybe that's why some of you have been left feeling uncontacted. Anyone may attend any Potowmack Chapter Board meeting: they are held usually on the first Thursday of every odd month, by Zoom, at 7 pm, and are listed on the Potowmack Chapter Events page of vnps.org. — Give us a visit and see if you'd like to stay.

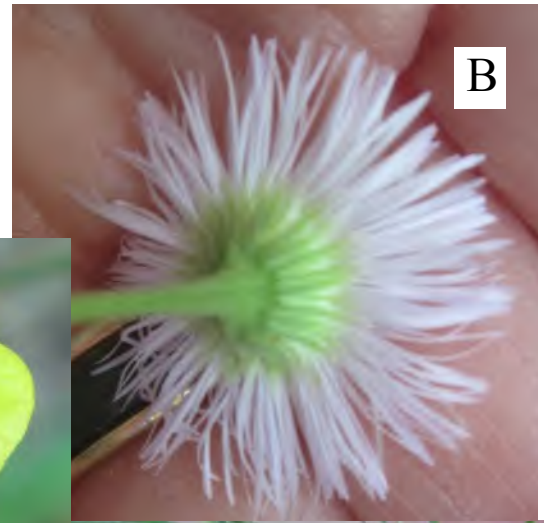
Is there a place & time where you would like to see a guided native plant walk? Or (gasp) would you like to lead a walk to share your favorite native place with like-minded native plant enthusiasts? Contact walks chair Karen Sheffield (ks_snowleopard@hotmail.com). Again, we offer an honorarium to walk leaders. And if you have a favorite place but don't feel up to trying to name everything of interest, there is always the notion of "hosting" a walk rather than "leading" one. In this model, you set the time & place, but specify that you will only show people where to go and expect the group to figure out the identifications. — This is more or less the way Grass Bunch ambles work.

The Potowmack Chapter has a place for anyone who wants to further the cause of native plants in whatever way.

Bracts and Sepals

Bracts are leaf-like structures subtending a flower or inflorescence; sepals are leaf-like parts of the flower calyx. Sometimes in the sedges, the presence or absence or shape of bracts can help identify the species. Photos by Margaret Chatham. Answers on page 6.

- 1 *Benthamidia florida*, Flowering Dogwood
- 2 *Carex amphibola*, Eastern Narrow-leaved Sedge
- 3 *Carex jamesii*, James's Sedge
- 4 *Chionanthus virginicus*, Fringetree
- 5 *Erigeron philadelphicus*, Fleabane
- 6 *Helianthus decapetalus*, Thinleaf Sunflower
- 7 *Hibiscus laevis*, Halberd-leaved Rose Mallow
- 8 *Osmorhiza longistylis*, Anisroot
- 9 **Ranunculus bulbosus*, Bulbous Buttercup
- 10 *Rubus flagellaris*, Dewberry
- 11 **Trillium cuneatum*, Little Sweet Betsy
- 12 *Viola canadense*, Canada Violet
- 13 *Viola eriocarpa*, Smooth Yellow Violet



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Word of the Month: Bract



Flora of Virginia's definition: A specialized leaf from the axil of which arises a flower or flower stalk; more loosely, any more or less reduced or modified leaf associated with a flower or an inflorescence but not being a part of the flower itself; sometimes also applied to a specialized leaf subtending an inflorescence. In conifers, one of the primary appendages of the cone axis in the axils of which are borne the ovuliferous scales.

At left, Flowering Dogwood (*Benthamidia florida* formerly *Cornus florida*) displays our most famous bracts. Photo by Margaret Chatham.

Answers to puzzle on page 5: 1-K, bracts; 2-H, bracts; 3-I, bracts; 4-F, bracts; 5-B, involucral bracts; 6-M, involucral bracts; 7-L, involucral bracts below calyx lobes; 8-E, two levels of bracts; 9-A, sepals; 10-C, sepals; 11-G, sepals; 12-D, sepals; 13-J, sepals.