

WILD NEWS

PRINCE WILLIAM WILDFLOWER SOCIETY, A Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Number 99-01

January-February, 1999

MEMBER SLIDE SHOW MEETING JANUARY 18

The next general membership meeting is Monday, January 18, 1999 at 7:30 p.m. at Bethel Lutheran Church in Manassas. Members are invited to bring slides of their summer vacations and wildflower forays to share with fellow members. Let's break the winter doldrums and dream about wild places to visit. Warren Ryder and Nancy Vehrs plan to bring slides of their August trip to southwestern Utah (including Bryce and Zion National Parks, Cedar Breaks National Monument, and Dixie National Forest) and the mountains, forests, deserts, and red rock formations of northern Arizona. If past member slide show meetings are any indication, we may be treated to photos from Canada to Florida or Virginia to California.

For further information about the meeting, call President Gina Yurkonis at 540-347-1027 or Vice-President Nancy Arrington at 703-368-8431.

VNPS ANNUAL WORKSHOP ON PLANT-INSECT CONNECTIONS

This year the connections between plants and insects will be the focus of the VNPS annual workshop in Richmond on Saturday, March 13. Wasps, bees, galls, and urban moth and butterfly gardens will all be discussed. The workshop is limited to 100 participants, so sign up early to reserve your slot. Look for the registration form in your January *Bulletin* later this month. For further information, contact VNPS Education Chair Effie Fox at 540-347-4090 or Nicky Staunton at 703-368-9803.

FREE TREE TREK JAN 23

Learn to use keys and other tools to identify winter trees from such clues as shape, twigs, and bark. Then explore the winter woods for yourself to practice your new skills. Location: Huntley Meadows Visitors Center, 1-3:30 p.m. Reservations are required and the event will be cancelled in case of rain. Call 768-2525.



From the President - Gina Yurkonis

I hope you all have had a wonderful holiday season and I hope it continues for months. My most memorable experience was standing in line in the rain for five hours to see the Van Gogh exhibition at the National Gallery. The paintings themselves were stunning. The exhibition was there since October, but I waited until the last week to go. OK, a show of hands: How many of us were "last minute" shoppers this year? How many stopped to quick pick something up on the way to a friend's house? How many will wait till April 15th for you-know-what? Someone once said "If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would get done." Then, there are people like my sister who have everything decorated, wrapped, and baked by December first. I always thought she was a freak of nature. Now, I'm not so sure.

Here's my point (finally). The dogwoods have their buds wrapped and ready to go, same with the azaleas and red maples. The Carolina wrens and titmice are singing about their breeding prowess. Nature always seems to be ready for what comes next and is known for her reliability. Shouldn't those of us who strive to be close to nature follow? Why not order now from those seed catalogs overflowing the mailbox, get

advanced tickets to Maymont and renew your VNPS membership before the dues go up? I'll leave it up to you.

-Gina

LATE NEWSLETTERS

I sincerely apologize to those members who did not receive the Nov/Dec newsletter until the end of December. I was unaware it was oversized and required additional postage. Interestingly enough, the Postal Service delivered over half of the mailing without the extra postage affixed. From now on, I'll be acutely aware of postal regulations and act accordingly.

- Nancy Vehrs

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Deadline for the Mar-Apr issue is Mar. 1, 1999. Mail information to Nancy Vehrs at 8318 Highland St., Manassas, VA 20110-3671 or e-mail to nvehrs@ibm.net.

BOARD TRIBUTE FROM PAST PRESIDENT

On Monday, October 19, I turned the files and other PWWS stuff over to Gina Yurkonis, and the key to PO Box 83 to Diane Flaherty. With the new board taking over, I'd like to thank all the board members who worked so hard with me these past years. Martha Slover has hung in there as vice-president for the past four years, leading walks and helping with the plant sale and garden tour. Secretary Diane Flaherty has kept the minutes and sent out the annual meeting notice the past two years, and will continue in that position. As treasurer, Marie Davis has done our budget and kept our accounts up-to-date, as well as organizing the garden tour, dispensing landscaping advice, and talking to garden clubs and other groups around the area.

Botany chair Marion Lobstein is our liaison with the community college and the state arboretum, and writes those wonderful articles for the newsletter. New president Gina Yurkonis already has board experience as conservation chair, and done programs for our chapter. Education chair Kim Hosen has done a dynamite job organizing the wonderful Nearby Nature workshops. We have Joann Krumviede to thank for the fabulous refreshments at our meetings.

Along with keeping our

membership list organized and up-to-date, Nancy Vehrs has taken on the job of newsletter editor, and as you can see, she is doing a fantastic job. Nancy Arrington did that job for so many years and she was a hard act to follow. She also works hard to organize the annual plant sale, and is horticulture chair for the state board. Thanks to Charles Smith, we have had some really outstanding programs these past two years. Elaine Haug has seen to it that important plant communities in our county receive protection as registry sites, and she and Nicky Staunton have worked hard to inventory the plants at the new Occoquan Bay refuge. Nicky keeps us up-to-date on events at the state level and is a wonderful resource for PWWS. Thanks, all!

- Helen Walter

MAYMONT FLOWER & GARDEN SHOW IN FEB

The 10th annual Maymont Flower and Garden Show with its theme "Once Upon a Garden" will be held Feb. 18-21 at the Richmond Centre in Richmond. U.S. National Arboretum Native Plants Collections Curator Joan Feeley is one of the scheduled speakers. Tickets are \$10 in advance, \$12 at the door. For more information, call 804-358-7166 or visit the Maymont web site, www.maymont.org.

VNPS HISTORY - A SPEECH FROM FOUNDER MARY PAINTER

(NOTE: The following article is from the Summer 1998 edition of The Leaflet, the newsletter of the Piedmont Chapter of the VNPS. It is an excerpt of a speech presented by Mary Painter at an Arbor Day Dedication ceremony on April 10, 1998 at the State Arboretum at Blandly.)

Since the society's founding in April of 1982, many fellow members have asked me how the VNPS was started, or what prompted me to get it going.

While working as a greenhouse manager for a well-known retail nursery in Fairfax, Virginia, I arrived one afternoon to find scores of freshly dug terrestrial orchids piled high upon the potting room benches. The nursery owner exclaimed that he had gotten a great deal from a collector who had bought a truckload of pink ladies' slippers from someone down in the Blue Ridge. Shortly thereafter, I gave him my notice; however, my indignant departure from the job did nothing to save the orchids already lifted from their forest floor.

Originally named the Virginia Wildflower Preservation Society, our organization is now 17 years old, the same age as my son Andrew. He's now driving and the Society is now thriving.

Prior to the Society's founding, I made visits to New England Wildflower Society's Garden in the Woods in Framingham, Massachusetts, as well as to Chapel Hill's North Carolina Botanical Garden. In those places, and in staff members such as Ken

Moore (NCBG), I found the inspiration and primary models for a similar organization in Virginia. California's Native Plant Society provided us the most practical and well-formulated by-laws as guidelines for building our organizational framework.

While I was wading through incorporation paperwork, Nancy Arrington had a comparable game plan of her own for the Prince William County area. It is a little-known fact that, due in great part to Nancy's generous cooperation, the Society was able to evolve from the outset as a statewide organization. Rather than continuing in her efforts to build a separate membership, Nancy spearheaded the formation of our second VNPS chapter, in Prince William. Shortly before this, our charter chapter, the Potowmack Chapter, was born out of my first organization meeting, held at Mount Vernon.

In the early going, many chapter members formed area rescue teams to salvage and relocate to approved repository sites many native plant species threatened by highway construction and land development in the northern Virginia area. As such labor-intensive rescue projects came to be recognized as "last ditch conservation efforts," the Society's early Board of Directors soon shifted its focus toward public education and broadening our membership. From the outset, we worked in concert with related agencies and organizations to add muscle to legislation impacting wild plants and wild places.

Today's host chapter was the third to establish itself. Our Piedmont Chapter first gathered at Great Meadow in Fauquier County under the co-presidents Gina Farrar and Deenya Greenland in July 1984. The

strides taken together, and even the early growing pains shared by our fellow officers and VNPS board members will ever unite us as friends.

And strides *have* been taken. In my profession I see expanding numbers of legitimate growers and sources of nursery-propagated native plants and seeds in the trade. Our calendars feature increasing numbers of dates for regional conferences, symposia, and workshops which focus on the protection and use of native plants in our landscapes, their horticultural merit, medicinal and historical values, and the critical roles they play in our natural world. This spring season alone, I've worked with faculty and PTA representatives from 16 Virginia schools which are developing and planting schoolyard habitat gardens. These "outdoor labs" (as Effie Fox would tell you) provide children and their families with living learning centers that demonstrate the connectedness of life - keys to understanding plant systems, ecology, species diversity and the precious links of life on this planet.

I have witnessed the production of so many fine educational materials and brochures through the Society and its chapters. The growing numbers of citizens who have become caught up in the rising popularity of wildflowers now have access to recommended reading lists, native plant source lists, brochures on hedgerows or butterfly gardening, field trip plant check lists, newsletters, and calendars of related events. Membership within an organization such as ours provides, perhaps most importantly of all, the companionship of folks who simply appreciate the increased opportunities to experience and learn more about our natural heritage, and the mysteries

and study of our native flora.

There is a remarkable concentration of environmentally sound minds and native-plant champions now gathered on this lawn. And I can think of no more fitting place for "my tree" than our state arboretum's wildflower trail, where so many of you here today are directly involved in its development and planning and stewardship.

Our organization has not quite yet an office location. Yet lacking that permanent ground to call home, our VNPS is "rooted" in every pending conservation legislation, every haven such as this place, every child's question and curiosity, every regional native plant conference or pamphlet about invasive aliens, every wetland and wood and roadside.

I looked through old files and storage boxes last night to uncover something I brought with me today. It's a photo composite of early VNPS VIPs, some no longer with us, but very much in my heart today. They have been, as you are now, our most precious natural resources of all, because you hold the motivation and decency and kindness to enlighten others, that we may practice respect for life in its many diverse forms. Thank you for my *Nyssa sylvatica*. I'd like to think that my grandchildren might some day take comfort in its shade and think of me.

-Mary Painter

(*Editor's Note:* Since this speech was presented, the VNPS has acquired permanent office space at Blandy.)

SKUNK CABBAGE

Marion Lobstein
Associate Professor of Biology,
Northern Virginia Community
College, Manassas Campus

The maroon and green hoods of skunk cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) are one of the first signs of early spring. In swamps, on stream banks, and in bogs along the East Coast these leathery pointed cowls begin pushing through the snow or swamp "muck" as early as mid-February. If there is snow or ice present, you may notice snow or ice patches melting as the sharp-pointed hoods begin to poke through the icy cover. How this amazing plant melts snow and/or ice will be explained later in this article.

Skunk cabbage is a perennial member of the Araceae or arum family. Its distribution is from Nova Scotia to Florida and west to Minnesota and Iowa. Jack-in-the-pulpit, green dragon, arrow arum, and golden club are other members of this predominately tropical family native to our area. The scientific name of skunk cabbage is very appropriate: *Symplocarpus* meaning compound fruit referring to the fruit structure and *foetidus* meaning fetid referring to the unpleasant smell of bruised or crushed plant parts. The smell has been described as a combination of

skunk, putrid meat, and garlic odors. I personally think the smell is reminiscent of rubber tires and is not that unpleasant.

The presence of crystals of calcium oxalate in the vegetative parts of skunk cabbage is typical of members of the arum family. These crystals cause a burning, peppery sensation if plant parts are eaten raw. This characteristic and the cabbage- or tobacco-like leaves and showy hood have given rise to other common names such as stinking cabbage, swamp cabbage, parson-in-the-pellary, and pole-cat weed. Thoreau referred to skunk cabbage as "hermits of the bog." The actual skunk cabbage flowers are numerous, small, and inconspicuous. They are imbedded in the spadix, a brownish-yellow ovid structure surrounded by the leathery cowl-like pointed hood, the spathe. This spathe is the most visible part of the "flower," correctly referred to as the inflorescence. The flowers on a single spadix are either male or female at any given time. Even though this family is a monocot one, the flower parts are in 4's rather than the usual 3's. Both male and female flowers lack petals but do have fused sepals forming a calyx. The male flowers have four stamens. The female flowers has a single ovary semi-buried in the spadix.

The spathe or hood surrounding the spadix is formed from two fused leaves. Aerobic respiration, the same process by which we break down our

food to obtain energy and maintain our body temperature, is the source of heat from the hood. The metabolic level of this process in skunk cabbage is comparable to that of a small shrew or hummingbird. The heat and other chemical processes such as fermentation that also occurs in the hood result in the release of malodorous organic compounds such as amines, indoles, and skatole that mimic the smell of dung or carrion. The combination of heat and smell attracts thrips, carrion flies, and beetles that serve as the primary pollinators. The heat generated may be as high as 36-39°F above the surrounding air temperature. A constant temperature range of 70-72°F can be maintained inside the hood for two weeks or longer. The arum family of plants is the only one known to turn on an "internal furnace" to release disagreeable (to some human noses!) odors that attract pollinators. This phenomenon was recorded as early as the late 1700's by the French naturalist Lamarck. As the insects are attracted to a hooded inflorescence they fly into a heated chamber with very slippery walls that will send them sliding to the area of the small flowers to either pick up pollen if male flowers are mature or transfer pollen if the female flowers are receptive. Insects such as bees, though not potential pollinators, have been seen entering skunk cabbage hoods--perhaps to warm up on a chilly early spring day!

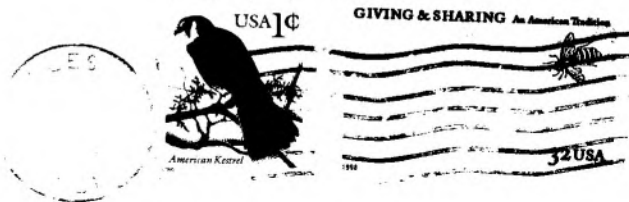
The buds for the inflorescences are formed in autumn and may be visible then but most appear in mid-February and continue to be visible through April. The fruit that develops after pollination and fertilization resembles a dirty tennis ball is visible by autumn and is a spongy mass up to five inches in diameter in which spherical seeds are imbedded. Most of these seeds will germinate near the parent plant but squirrels and other rodents may gather and store seeds acting as seed dispersers. The large cabbage-like leaves that will be present through late spring and summer begin to appear like fat fingers by late spring. Lasting all summer, they may reach one foot in width and are borne on 2-4 foot tall petioles. Unlike other monocots, the veins of the leaves are in a netted pattern rather than parallel. The vast rhizome and root system needed to secure the plant in the soft swamp muck make transplanting very difficult. After the leaves disappear in late summer, the roots contract drawing the rhizomes and shoot buds under the ground or muck. When a seed germinates, its roots that develop will pull the young plant deep underground so that it may be 5-7 years before a first inflorescence is produced above ground. Once established, however, skunk cabbage is long-lived with colonies surviving for up to a thousand years. This early portent of spring has historically had a number of

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medicinal and edible uses. Extracts from the rhizomes and roots have purported diuretic, emetic, narcotic, stimulant, and antispasmodic properties. Various preparations have been used by various Indian tribes and/or herbalists to treat asthma and other respiratory ailments, epilepsy, tetanus, cramps, and spasms. An ointment made from dried powdered root has been used to treat ringworm, rheumatism, and skin irritations. Various Indian tribes used roots and leaves as a poultice to treat sores and swelling as well as to draw out thorns and stickers. The odor of crushed plants parts supposedly can be inhaled to relieve

headaches. Young leaves have been parboiled with several water changes and eaten as greens as well as the rhizomes dried and eaten (this drying may take upto six to seven months). False hellebore (*Veratrum viride*) often grows in the same swampy setting, vaguely resembles skunk cabbage, and if eaten may cause violent poisoning. This late January into February keep your eyes and nose open for this strange, early sign of spring. The Swamp Trail at Great Falls Park (Virginia) is an excellent site to see skunk cabbage. Take time to become acquainted with and enjoy one of the most unusual and fascinating early spring wildflowers!

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A Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society
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January Meeting: 7:30 p.m., Monday, Jan. 18, 1999, Bethel Lutheran Church, Manassas

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