

The Grapevine

December 2024

New River Valley Master Gardener Association Newsletter

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Share the Spare



Continuing Education: How to Get it & How to Record It

by Ashley Johnson

In addition to 20 service hours each year, as active Master Gardeners we also commit to earning 8 continuing education hours per year. Of course, 20 and 8 are the minimum. Find topics you're interested in and projects you love, and those hours quickly add up!

Many activities count toward continuing education, such as:

- In-person lectures, workshops, and tours
- Online webinars
- Gardening-related books
- Master Gardener Book Club gatherings (and we have so much fun!)

*Reminder from Wendy: At least 4 of your yearly continuing education hours must be non-reading hours, such as: lectures, webinars, workshops, tours, etc. That is, something **BESIDES** reading a gardening-related book is needed for at least half of your continuing education hours.*

Top three tips for earning continuing education hours:

- ⇒ **Read the weekly email.** All events listed in **GREEN font** are approved continuing education opportunities. For instance, in one weekly email there were: books to read; workshops about rain barrels, hydroponics, hypertufa, and cool flowers; plant tours; and a book club gathering. All of these are continuing education activities, and they all would count toward your 8 hour continuing education requirement!
- ⇒ **If you see an interesting workshop, webinar, book, etc., that relates to gardening and is educational, send the information to Wendy for approval for continuing education credit.** Often, it can count. Many times it will also be shared with other Master Gardeners who might also be interested.
- ⇒ **Attend VMGA educational offerings.** Join our state Master Gardener association and participate in its events. There are tours, workshops, and speakers planned in various locations around the state throughout the year, along with Master Gardener College offered each summer. VMGA events let you meet other Master Gardeners and enjoy a change of scenery.

You did it, now get credit for it:

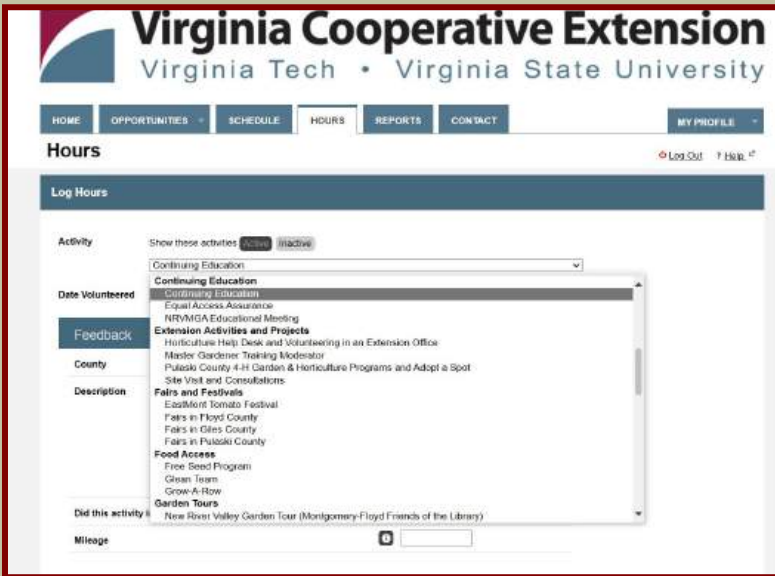
- 1. Be sure to enter ALL continuing education that you have done into Better Impact. (You can use the "My Impact" app on your smart phone or visit the website <https://app.betterimpact.com/Login/Volunteer>**

Even if you've already reached that 8 hour minimum, continue to enter any additional continuing education activities you participate in. They continue to count! This helps us with grant funding, reporting, and showing how Master Gardeners are not only serving our community but continuing to learn and grow.

2. Log in with your User Name and Password

3. Click on the "Hours" tab

4. Find "continuing education" in the "Activity" section at the top of the submission. You can either scroll down to find it or start typing "continu..." and it will auto fill for you.



5. Enter the date you completed the continuing education activity (finished the book, attended the workshop, whatever you did).

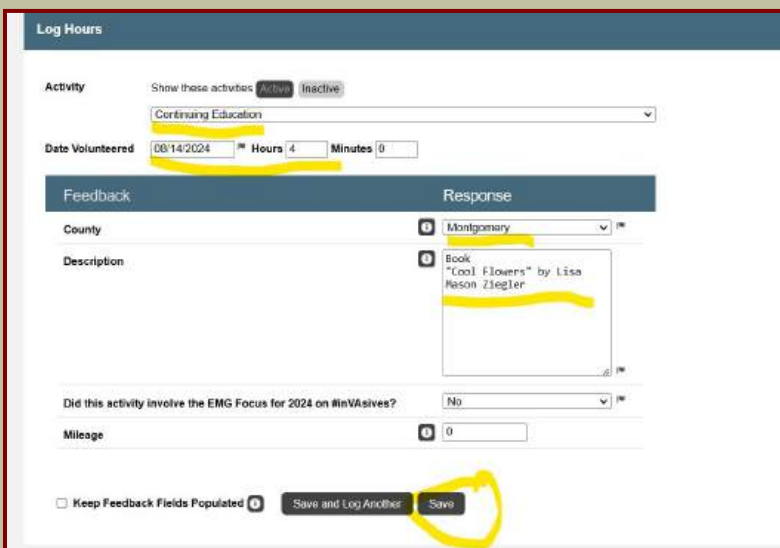
6. Enter the total hours and minutes you spent, including travel time if there was any.

7. Select the county where it took place; "other" is an option for outside the NRV.

8. Enter the information for what you did in the description area. If you read a gardening-related book, you'd enter the title and author here. If you attended a workshop, enter the title and location here.

9. Enter "yes or no" about whether the activity involved invasive species.

10. Enter mileage if you are tracking it for your personal income tax purposes, but mileage is not reported for MG education.



11. Be sure to click "Save" before leaving this screen.

From the President

How are we nearing the end of 2024? As you are putting your gardens to bed, mark your calendars for the NRVMGGA winter milk jug sowing class AND seed swap on January 25, 2025. That is right; this group is always planning something!

This year, I found my professional work centered around assisting nonprofit organizations, in the US and internationally, develop five-year strategic plans and management tools to strengthen boards and help boards and their staffs communicate with their members. In the midst of this, I thought: I should apply these efforts to the benefit of the NRVMGGA.

Buckle up and prepare for management talk. I will try to make it engaging!

In discussions with the NRVMGGA board, we tried to feel our way through defining what the NRVMGGA does, what the NRVMG program is, and what value we add as an organization. A main reason for forming the NRVMGGA was that the Association, as a 501c3, has the ability to hold and distribute funds and is separate from Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), which oversees the MG program, and VCE finances.

The Association supports the mission of and works in coordination with the MG program, but it has responsibilities to its members (dues are paid, after all), and it has programming that generates and distributes revenue (through grants, etc.) that must be accounted for by the Association. To that end, it is advisable for the Association to gather its own data that focuses on Association priorities. Wendy always shares the impressive statistics the NRVMGs report through Better Impact (be sure to REPORT YOUR HOURS), and that data goes higher up the VCE chain to demonstrate program value to the community. Great numbers—our MGs work hard, but this doesn't really help the Association figure out what it's doing and how it's impacting its members.

A statistics sheet and a score card have been developed as management tools to be shared with members to measure and track performance in identified priority areas. The NRVMGGA board knows what activities are going on, but it needs to effectively communicate these with members and with the public to retain and encourage new MGs and create new partnerships. These documents will be shared with members to see what you think and whether this is useful. I was surprised as I was developing these documents just how much this group of volunteer board members has accomplished this year. We discuss many things at our board meetings, but once actual data is captured, it provides a better understanding of where we are and where we want to go.

Management talk has ended.

I began my term as president with a brief survey of members, and I have asked the board if they would support my developing an end-of-year survey to get your feedback and help guide future programming. They agreed. I'll have a draft of survey questions to share with the board at our December meeting, so be on the lookout for it in your email later in December. I greatly look forward to your input. We need to hear from you!

We have so much talent and experience in the NRVMGGA and MG program. Every member needs to feel appreciated and valued in some way. If that isn't happening, we need to know.

I know I have felt appreciated and supported in this role as president, and I thank you all for a great experience. I look forward to the new NRVMGGA board and can't wait to see what exciting developments happen in the New Year.

Wendy Words

Congratulations to the Master Gardener volunteers who earned the most hours in 2024!

Thanks to the NRVMGGA, we have the Gwen Ewing Service Hour Award for the Master Gardener who earned the most hours in one year and to the 2024 class intern who earned the most hours in one year. This award started in 2017 with Gwen Ewing being the first recipient. In addition to getting their name on a plaque, they also get a plant stake that reads Master Gardener Volunteer Award. A Master Gardener cannot get this award more than once. This gives others a chance to be recognized. An intern can get the Master Gardener award even if they got the intern award. The recipient for the 2024 Master Gardener award and plant stake goes to David McEwen with 248 hours. The 2024 intern award goes to Dottie Rottkamp with 250.5 hours. Other Master Gardeners who were recognized for their service were Beth Kirby with 323 hours, Ashley Johnson with 284 hours, Mel Flaherty with 245 hours, Michelle Alon with 238 hours, and Beth Umberger and Lynn Brammer who have yet to enter their hundreds of hours served by the time of the holiday potluck.

I would like to thank the 2024 NRVMGGA Board for their hard work and dedication to strengthening the Master Gardener program. The NRVMGGA hosted social and educational events, organized the book club, and served the community through the plant sale, being docents at the NRV Garden Tour, and the community grant program. These programs and events rely on the leadership of the NRVMGGA board and the NRVMGGA appointed committees. Thank you for all that you do for the NRVMGGA and the Master Gardener program.

2024 NRVMGGA Board:

President: Sarah Smiley

Vice president: Ashley Johnson

Secretary: Morgan St. Laurent

Treasurer: Beth Kirby

Member-at-large: Lauralee Cornwell

Member-at-large: Karen Parker

Member-at-large: Donna Cunningham

2024 Class Member-at-large: Amanda Kelly

Please see p. 9 for the 2025 NRVMGGA membership form.

Travels With(out) Paige

by Erica Jones

I got to go to the coast of Georgia early this fall (Paige trotted off to the local outdoor kennel and schmoozed with her canine friends). This was just after the two hurricanes, which made for some new-to-me observations.

Maritime forests are along the coast and grow in some pretty tough conditions. Maritime forests are defined as forests along coastlines within the reach of salt spray. Master Gardeners all know the challenges of gardening in a high sand soil, and you can imagine the effects of salt spray on leaves.

The forest between our hotel on Jekyll Island and the ocean was accessed by a boardwalk. The ground underneath was majorly up and down; think sand dunes but with trees on top of them with their draping of Spanish moss. Underneath the trees was growing the icon on South Carolina license plates—the palmetto. While SC plates look like they are aiming towards the cabbage (much taller) palmetto, the ones in my photo are probably dwarf palmetto (*Sabal minor*). Palmettos are a bit tough to walk through. Those fronds are stiff and somewhat serrated and chest high. (Oh, no short cuts.)

The trees along the coast were primarily live oaks. Live oaks are an almost-evergreen, in that they keep their leaves all winter but then drop them all at once in the spring. A true evergreen never drops all of its leaves all at once in normal conditions. You would think the avid horticulturalists would have come



up with a name for that particular style of leaf drop, but who knows... The leaves must be slow to rot; they were still pretty crunchy underfoot after being on the ground for some 6 months.

The live oaks on Jekyll Island obviously suffered in the hurricane(s). All of the trees on the ocean side were browned from getting blasted with salt spray for days, but within the maritime forest the leaves were still green. Live oaks have root systems that spread out extremely wide, making them resistant to getting blown over. One day, in the historic part of Jekyll Island, I watched the grounds crew propping back up one of those tall palmettos that had blown over. The only place I saw downed live oaks was on the north end of the island. Apparently the

north end is eroding due to a man-made navigation channel being dug in the Turtle River, which is on the west side.

On the north end of the island, along with all of the live oak corpses, were some remnants of forest soil, making for odd oases of pancake-flat brown six inches above the eroding smooth sand. "Driftwood Beach" is a really spooky place AND is misnamed. I guess "Erosion Beach" just does not have the same ring to it.

I will refrain from comments about the quality of drivers of cars with those palmetto (SC) plates to keep peace with our non-Virginia Mgers.



This piece of live oak was probably the result of hurricane winds.

Cumberland Island is the next island on the coast south of Jekyll. A lot of it is a National Seashore, although there are private inholdings. The only way to get to the park is by ferry from the town of St Marys. The National Park Service IS deliberately limiting the number of people who can visit. They had just started the ferry service back up to the southern end of Cumberland when we went to Georgia; the northern end (wilderness area) was still closed to park visitors.

Cumberland Island was inhabited by several indigenous tribes before the Spaniards brought infectious disease and the French attacked. Later the southern end was inhabited by wealthy white folks and their servants and slaves. The first plantation was called Dungeness and was built from tabby. Tabby is a mixture of lime made from burnt oyster shells, sand, ash, pieces of oyster shells, and water. Lots of buildings made of tabby remain on Cumberland; it is tough stuff and the local substitute for bricks (no clay!).

The most famous part of Cumberland Island might be the ruins of the Carnegie estate. It was built in the late 1800s and was burned in 1959, but the remains are still standing. It is a very spooky place to eat lunch. There are also numerous tabby buildings around the burned mansion, a long pergola, a gigantic greenhouse, and a massive flat area which probably was used to produce



Dock house and a live oak on Cumberland Island. Photos: Erica Jones

vegetables for the estate. I bumped into a fruiting grapefruit tree protected by a flock of small trees. Also on the island are feral swine (who like to excavate the forest floor) and wild, unmanaged equines that mostly keep the grass short on the massive grounds around the estate. The National Park Service holds swine hunts to try to control the population; a NPS ranger told me they do nothing with the horses. Given all of the four-legged residents, only the structure of the gardens remains—very few plants, although there is a magnificent alley of live oaks adjoining the dock where the ferry lands.

Garden Frogs

by Martha Fawzy Akers, Sharon Babineau, Saroja Cox, Ashley Johnson, and Toni Pitts

This project is entering its third year at Falling Branch Elementary and was the creation of our very own Master Gardener, Martha. The mission is simple: get kids growing!

Four raised beds have been built in the outdoor recess areas, and this past school year one garden teepee for vine crops was added. Students join our Master Gardeners during recess to help plant, weed, water, harvest, and sample our crops. This spring students started their own tomato and basil plants. Once the plants were hardened off and ready for transplanting outdoors, every student in the school (all 565!) took home two healthy, young plants. We received thank you notes from families who were so excited to start gardening at home.

Students are learning gardening skills, exploring new foods, and gaining the independence that growing your own food can offer.

Our "garden frogs" team can always use another helper or two, so please contact Martha if you'd be interested in helping with this weekday project.



Martha and Toni cleaning the beds out after summer, getting ready for a fall planting. Wiregrass is proving quite the challenge, but we're not giving up!



Martha and student starting tomato and basil seeds. While we worked, Martha asked this student, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" He said, "I want to be a gardener, just like you!"



We found an earthworm while planting seeds. There is no excitement quite like elementary schoolers with a worm! They all needed a turn to hold it, and we decided as a group, after lengthy discussion and debate, to name it "Dinosaur".



Sharon and Saroja helping students plant seeds for spring cool season crops.



Saroja and students starting tomato and basil seeds.

**New River Valley Master Gardener Association
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP – 2025**

The purpose of the Association is to provide service to the community by promoting good horticultural stewardship in accordance with standards approved by VCE and the Master Gardener Program. Additionally, the Association will foster communication, education, and fellowship among its members and the community.

Advantages to being a member of the NRVGMA are 1. continuing education programs, 2. opportunity to apply for scholarships to attend educational workshops and seminars (including Master Gardener College), and 3. opportunity to receive a \$100 mini-grant for a specific project.

Members of the Association are expected to participate in our fundraising activities, for which you will receive service hours credit. This is how we raise funds for dispersal as community grants, as well as mini-grants. Volunteer fundraising opportunities include the May Plant Sale (Saturday before Mother's Day (Beth Kirby, chair), Rain Barrel prepping for sale (Rachael Wilkins and Andy Smith, chair), and Garden Tour (Saturday during July).

The May Plant Sale involves digging, potting, and tending/over-wintering plants from various donating locations, propagating, working the set-up and working the day of the sale. Rain barrel volunteers help clean out the pickle barrels used for seminars and sales. The Garden Tour needs volunteers to act as "docents" in the gardens on the tour day.

Fundraising activities which I am interested in volunteering for (check all that apply):

May Plant Sale (5/10/25) _____ Rain Barrel Prep _____ Garden Tour (7/12/25) _____

Please indicate any area listed below where you might consider using your individual talents in 2025: (check all that apply)

<input type="checkbox"/> Membership (<i>Secretary and Treasurer on committee</i>)	Compile member information and publish annual directory
<input type="checkbox"/> Program (<i>Vice President, Chair</i>)	Planning, coordinating and communicating membership meetings
<input type="checkbox"/> Fundraising	Plan, organize and implement fundraising activities
<input type="checkbox"/> Financial Review	Conduct annual review of association finances
<input type="checkbox"/> Communications (<i>Secretary, Chair</i>)	Publish Grapevine newsletter, maintain website and administer social media
<input type="checkbox"/> Arts and graphics	
<input type="checkbox"/> Event Photography	
<input type="checkbox"/> Media Production	
<input type="checkbox"/> Newsletter (Grapevine)	
<input type="checkbox"/> Social Media Administration	
<input type="checkbox"/> Website Maintenance	
<input type="checkbox"/> History	Build and maintain historical records of association
<input type="checkbox"/> Grants	Plan, organize and solicit grant applicants. Review and recommend recipients.
<input type="checkbox"/> Nominating	Seek candidates for NRVGMA officers and members at large.

Please print the following:

Last Name	First Name		
Address	City	State	Zip
Preferred Phone	Email Address		

Individual Membership (\$15) 2025 Trainee (Free) Emeritus Membership (Free)
Checks should be made payable to: NRVGMA

PLEASE NOTE: You must be a certified VCE MG to be a member of the NRVGMA. Please log into Better Impact to review the qualification questions and update the expiration date to 12/31/2025.

Return this completed form and dues payment by February 28th (after this date you may not be included in the directory):
VCE-New River Valley Master Gardeners Association, Montgomery Co Office, 755 Roanoke St, Suite 1G, Christiansburg, VA 24073

Office Use Only

Paid Dues? Yes _____ No _____ Recorder's Initials: _____

Growing Your Own Tobacco in Virginia

by Emma Patterson¹

One Saturday a man approached a Master Gardener plant clinic booth where I was volunteering. "Got a question for you," he mused. Expecting a typical query about tomatoes, sage, or rain barrels, I smiled and nodded encouragingly. "Can I grow my own tobacco in Virginia?" Uh-oh, a stumper. "That's a great question," I replied, the wheels already spinning in my mind. "Let me get back to you on that one." Time to hit the research. And so, these FAQ were developed.

Q: Hasn't growing tobacco been a big deal in Virginia for a long time?

A: Agriculture is Virginia's largest private industry, and Virginia ranked a distant third nationally in producing tobacco as of 2021², after North Carolina and Kentucky. Tobacco is in the same botanical family as tomatoes and potatoes but is not originally native to Virginia. In 1613 Jamestown, John Rolfe shipped his first crop to England. Virginia's economy thrived on tobacco growing and processing for the next three centuries.³ With growing concerns about the health effects of tobacco in the 1990s, the number of farms dropped to one-tenth of farms producing tobacco in the 1950s, however.

Q: So, with that long-term impact, can anyone grow tobacco in Virginia?

A: Some Virginians may seek to grow their own tobacco to save money or to try heritage tobaccos that are not on store shelves.⁴ Taylor Clarke, Unit Coordinator and Extension Agent at VCE-Mecklenburg, states that anyone in Virginia can grow tobacco now. Still, the "question of growing tobacco for personal consumption is more complicated than planting and growing to maturity. FDA began regulating all tobacco products" through the [Tobacco Control Act](#) in 2009. Even though the act applies to commercial growers who sell tobacco products, awareness of the FDA regulations is important both because the Virginia attorney general considers tobacco a drug⁵ as well as an agricultural product and because it is only available to adults 21 years and older. Clarke added, "Most smoking tobacco products that people are consuming are blends of several types of tobacco." For example, "VA dark tobacco has historically been used in pipe tobacco blends, some dry and moist snuff, [snus]⁶ products, some chewing tobacco, and cigars."



Q: How challenging is it to grow and cure tobacco for use?

A: Growing tobacco is intense and requires plenty of soil. Tobacco seeds are very tiny.⁷ Tobacco seedlings start in fine soil, then are transplanted to fields in the late spring after all danger of frost.⁸

David Reed, Extension Agronomist in Tobacco at VCE Southern Piedmont, writes, "Can you grow tobacco in your garden or yard? Yes, but growing the tobacco is the easy part as the drying/curing is the practical difficulty." Reed says, "Burley tobacco would be the easiest for a home gardener" to cure. "The plants could be hung in a garden shed and results will be dependent on the weather conditions. We describe this [as an] 'air curing.' Similarly, we have a second type of tobacco described as dark tobacco that can be air cured in the same manner as burley tobacco. And we have dark tobacco that is fire-cured where small fires are made on the floor of the barn and the curing tobacco is smoked as one might smoke a ham."

Clarke adds, "Each tobacco type has a specialized curing process that has specialized equipment. Flue-cured [tobacco] is cured in a weeklong process in a barn that controls temp, humidity and air flow. Flue-cured is harvested by priming leaves as they mature from the bottom of stalk to the top of stalk over 8 to 10 weeks in 3 to 4 harvests. Other types are stalk cut with 4-6 stalks placed on wooden sticks that are hung in specialized barns that allow some control of ventilation. Leaves cure and dry over 6 to 10 weeks. Some dark tobacco is also smoked by burning smoldering fires in the barns over several weeks during the curing process."

Reed notes that the flue-cured tobacco is the "most widely grown tobacco in the US and the [principal] tobacco in a cigarette. The curing process is much more precise as the temperature and humidity are controlled to first yellow the leaves to the desired color, then the lamina is dried, and finally the leaf midribs (stems). Flue-cured tobacco has a characteristic sweet aroma because this curing process converts carbohydrates to sugars in a controlled manner. Other tobacco types do not have any appreciable level of sugars."

Q: *Where can people get research-based information on growing tobacco?*

A: The [Southern Piedmont AREC](#) in Blackstone, VA, is the only Research and Extension Center offering support to tobacco producers in Virginia. It offers research-based management guidance for sustainable tobacco production.

¹The author offers Pat Norris deep thanks for her editorial work and for helpfully pointing the author to multiple resources on this topic.

²<https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/markets-and-finance-agriculture-facts-and-figures.shtml>

³<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/agriculture/tobacco.html>

⁴Also see <https://www.grit.com/farm-and-garden/crops/growing-tobacco-zm0z16ndztri/> and <https://www.augustachronicle.com/story/lifestyle/home-garden/2009/08/21/gar-545217-shtml/14625609007/> .

⁵See Virginia Rules Topics on tobacco at https://virginiarules.org/varules_topics/alcohol-tobacco-and-marijuana

⁶For more information on American snus, see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2288606/>

⁷More description on challenges of growing tobacco is shared at <https://www.braidedbowerfarm.com/growing-tn86-tobacco-in-oregon/>

⁸<http://www.virginiaplaces.org/agriculture/tobacco.html>

Wildlife and the Modern Garden

by Michelle Alon

"We don't own the planet Earth, we belong to it. And we must share it with our wildlife."
Steve Irwin

As I was weeding the front flower bed one autumn morning, I heard the warning cry of a crow and raised my eyes just in time to watch a Cooper's hawk fly very low, focused on whatever prey it spotted. It was no threat to the crow, so the peace was restored, though probably not to the rodent the hawk targeted. I also noticed evidence of the deer that passed through at night, right where I was working. The soil keeps many secrets: there's a whole world of living things sprawling, crawling, procreating under our feet. There are so many things happening inside the big womb of the soil that we can't see. But this little secret was out in the open. Some droppings and her foot prints were the silent proof that we share this garden with her.



I know this doe; she has been visiting our yard for years, and when I say *our* yard, she's included. We might have the legal deed to this house and land, but she has the birthrights to it, given to her by nature. She's an old brave one, *my* doe. She's limping due to an old fracture to her left front leg that never healed correctly, but it doesn't hinder her. This past spring she raised two beautiful fawns. She takes refuge in my garden, and it's an open buffet. Other people might see her and her kind as intruders, but I see her as a fellow soul, walking the path of life sharing the same space. If she wants to enjoy the bounty in my yard, she's welcome. I might have been the one who planted it, but it's planted in the soil that belongs to the rest of my fellow animals, big and small alike.



I think of her, of all the animals that are sharing this yard now, and of all those who have shared it through the ages, when it was entirely theirs to have. A lot of the things I plant in my garden are with them in mind. Butterflies and pollinators are having a ball here because I plant directly for them.

Birds of all kinds are more proactively invited. I stock the feeders from fall to spring to help with bulking up for winter and to feed babies in spring. I love being in the presence of birds. What marvelous creations! I can't tell you how excited I am whenever I see a lifer (a bird I see for the first time). Just this past year, a northern flicker, a Baltimore oriole and a yellow-bellied sapsucker visited my very own yard! They stop by because in a neighborhood lacking enough trees, my yard offers a feast and a place to rest. It's a win-win situation for me and the birds.

Some of the birds are permanent residents and some are migratory. I pay attention to their appearance and disappearance as evidence that the season has changed. A goldfinch changing its bright plumage to a darker one is a sign of the changing seasons. So was the dark-eyed junco that returned last week to remind me that winter is coming. Confusingly enough, in the very same week the last of the monarch butterflies under my care has eclosed. It was the



first week of November, so late for the butterfly, quite early for the dark-eyed junco. The peak of monarch's migration should have been mid-September. Will the monarch make it all the way to Mexico? Maybe... It's not an ordinary year. So many flowers are still blooming in November. Maybe, just maybe, global warming will be on his side this time and allow this one butterfly to make the trip successfully.

I'm not the only one confused by the weather. Nature has become confusing in its unpredictability, affecting gardens and creatures alike. Some animals will adapt; some might vanish.

Besides providing food for the birds, I provide housing for the cavity nesters, because, as I mentioned, there are not enough mature trees to go around. Dining and rent are free, but I do allow myself to invade their privacy by having web cams on a few feeders and nests. Oh! The things I learn! I marveled when I saw a couple of tree swallows build their nest, the female laying six eggs (an egg a day, 24 hours apart on the clock!) and successfully raising six healthy fledglings. I would never have known what was going inside the nest without the camera!

It might be pleasing to the eye to see all the green lawns, but I fear it's a death sentence for so many animals and their varieties. That's the challenge that newer subdivisions present. They are not nature friendly.

I can't change the world, but in my little piece of heaven, I can make the effort (still limited by HOA rules which I bend as much as I can). My lawn is spotted with "weeds", which is a general name for plants that didn't make the cut in human opinion. My yard is chemical free, and even when it broke my heart when Japanese beetles consumed nearly every leaf off my plum and cherry trees, leaving nothing but pitiful laced, dried leaves, I didn't treat them chemically. I did try to drop them into a bucket with soapy water, but it was a war of David and Goliath. This time, Japanese Goliath won. I was merely trying to protect the leaves of the cherry tree, a host for the lovely red-spotted purple butterfly. I gave up. I would not contaminate the butterflies' nursery. This year, there won't be baby caterpillars munching happily on nourishing leaves, but hopefully, next year, there will be fresh leaves for females to lay their eggs on safely.

While I'm doing all I can to provide an appropriate environment, I know that my efforts are just a tiny drop in the big dark sea of harsh reality. This year I saw and nourished only a quarter of monarch caterpillars compared to the previous year, although I had tripled the number of milkweed plants in my yard. I can't help but wonder: am I a witness to their demise? Is it the sign of their near extinction? We shouldn't interfere with nature, some would say, but nature is long gone where lawns are taking over natural habitats and herbicides and pesticides are contaminating so many gardens. I do my very tiny part to make a dent in this unfair, unhealthy reality. At the end of the day, if we won't save nature in all its glory, with animals, pollinators (also animals by the way), and plants, if we won't stop contaminating the soil and the water and the air we breathe, what do you think will happen to us?



All photos: Michelle Alon

Honoring Gwen Ewing: Master Gardener, Master Teacher, Master Friend

by Susan Perry

Beth Umberger organized and officiated at a tree-planting ceremony at the Montgomery Museum garden in October to honor Gwen's long-standing commitment to this Master Gardener project.



Photo: Wendy Silverman

As you all know, Gwen passed away in November, making this ceremony more poignant and bittersweet. Gwen, we appreciated your commitment and hard work!



Photo: Lynn Brammer

In June 2023, Gwen shared this bio for the Grapevine, and we share it again here.

I grew up on sand under a hot 100 degree sun in Augusta, Georgia. I'm the youngest of five children. My oldest sister lives in Augusta and is retiring from teaching first grade and kindergarten for 56 years on May 19th, 2023. My other three siblings and parents have passed on to that great big, beautiful garden in the sky. I retired in 2015, so I will have to teach my sister how to be retired.

I can remember my Mom taking us to the farmers' market and buying bushels of beans. We snapped; she blanched and froze them. My Dad gardened some: watermelon did well, along with tomatoes.

I enjoy meeting new people and learning gardening techniques from each of you. I've been a Master Gardener since 1990 (or was in 1989)? I left work at VT's Graduate School at 5 pm and drove over to the Hahn Horticulture Garden on VT campus, Washington Street, Monday nights, from 5:30 pm to 7 pm for 30 years and still volunteer there. I also volunteer at the Montgomery Museum Garden on Pepper Street in Christiansburg since it began.

From Ellen Burch:

Gwen is one of the first people I met when I joined the Master Gardeners. Outgoing and friendly, she always made sure to introduce gardeners to each other and to make new gardeners feel welcome. In the last few years she devoted herself to our group and to helping others. I ran into her frequently at the plant sale, Heritage Day, Montgomery Museum Garden, lectures at Warm Hearth, Wildwood Park and at Kroger (she'd driven a non-driving friend to the store for groceries). I will miss seeing her friendly face. May you rest in a heavenly garden, Gwen.

From Sarah Smiley:

Gwen Ewing was our historian and heart of the NRV MGA. She loved the MG program and the association and made it a point to meet every NRV MG. She often wanted to know you, and possibly attempt to bribe you with cookies, to get you to volunteer for a project, or some other activity she was involved in. Gwen was always interesting to talk to, and I greatly appreciated her sense of humor.

For example, at my very first NRV MG general meeting that had a potluck, I forgot to bring a plate and utensils. Gwen noticed this and kindly swooped in to provide me with a plate and utensils as she said she always brought extra. I made it a point to remember to bring these to the next potluck, I proudly showed Gwen, and she says, "Did you not think I would remember to bring extras? Did you not like MY plate? Here, use what I brought, and to help me feel better about this situation, you can help me carry in plants from my car."

I will miss her, her knowledge, and her sass. We are all better for having known her.

From Diane Relf:

Gwen Ewing was a special Master Gardener volunteer who could always be counted on to give her best and support the goals of the NRV MG programs. She could listen well, ask questions, and help you recognize just what you wanted to accomplish, then be there to get it done. She was dedicated to having gardens growing well and looking good for everyone to enjoy and learn from. At the same time, she would be at the plant clinics and other educational events to answer the question created by gardening. Her legacy is felt throughout the community and will serve to inspire new Master Gardeners to make an impact on the health and happiness of many people throughout the NRV. A staunch friend for over 30 years, she will be missed.

From Jill Kiecolt:

I met Gwen when she assisted with my Master Gardener training class in 2021. She was so knowledgeable and helpful. Three other things stand out for me: Gwen understood and promoted the importance of native plants. She always dressed beautifully and had a nice sense of style. Gwen SHOWED UP to Master Gardener events and activities. Not for nothing did she have over 7,000 volunteer hours!

From Wendy Silverman:

A few years back, I believe it was after a plant sale, Gwen gave me this gift. It is a wooden spoon decorated with silk flowers. The front of the spoon says, "**Crazy Plant Lady**"; the back of the spoon says, "**Teach Garden Inspire**". I have kept it in my office ever since she gave it to me. I now look at it in a new light.

Gwen was the "Crazy Plant Lady" who **Teaches**. She taught me to see different perspectives among our members. She taught me the importance of recognition by helping me choose gifts for the Graduation and Milestone celebrations over the years, based on what that person would want, not just by the hours they served. She taught me patience in accepting people by who and where they are. I am not a history buff, yet she taught me the importance of knowing our Master Gardener history. She taught the importance of giving to others by observing her helping others when they are in need.

Gwen loved to **Garden**. She has served 7122.96 hours since she began in the Master Gardener Program in 1990. Although the hours for each activity were not transferred to Better Impact, her love for gardening is evident in the reports from January 2021 to October 2024. Her favorite Master Gardener projects involved physical gardening. During the last 3 years, she spent 575 hours at the Montgomery Museum Garden, 525 hours at the Plant Sale, 224.5 hours at the Hahn Garden, and 89 Hours at the Christiansburg Presbyterian Church "Adopt a Plot". In 2024, Gwen volunteered 176.5 hours.

Gwen **Inspired** me to be the best I can be through her example: to think of others before myself and to go the extra mile and do a little more than I thought I could do and to take time to remember and honor Master Gardeners who are no longer with us.

Gwen, thank you for the lessons you have taught me, for sharing your love for gardening with the Master Gardener Program, and for the inspiration you have given to me and to everyone you touched.



Photo: Wendy Silverman

From Carol Trutt:

I met Gwen when I was working in the Mining and Minerals Engineering department at Virginia Tech. One of my jobs was to help the graduate students with pretty much everything. Gwen was the go-to person in the Graduate School. Whatever questions you had, Gwen was always there to help willingly, often leaving me laughing with her contagious laugh. So when Gwen retired all of us in each department who worked with graduate students were left with "now what are we going to do." She took with her years of knowledge. Somehow we muddled through, but we really missed having Gwen with her ready answers.

When I retired and started the Master Gardener program, lo and behold there was Ms. Gwen with her wonderful smile and contagious laugh!

We are all going to miss her so much!

From Mel Flaherty:

Gwen Ewing was a wonderful gardener and a friend to all! Although I am wheelchair bound, Gwen always made sure I felt included and welcome. We worked side by side at the Hahn and chatted often about life. Sadly, last Thursday evening on the way to our Holiday MG Potluck, I commented to my husband that we hadn't seen Gwen for some time and I really hoped Gwen would be at the potluck! When we got home, I drafted an email to Gwen telling her I missed her! Thankfully, Gwen is at peace and free of that oxygen tank she disliked! Gwen Ewing was a special, irreplaceable person and I'm sure she'll always be watching us at our plant sales and weeding at the Hahn! Rest in peace, dear Gwen.

From Michelle Alon:

I first met Gwen on February 21, 2024. Not that long ago if you think of it, but I'm pretty sure that anyone who has ever met her would agree that the impression she made is timeless. How on earth do I remember the exact date we met, you might ask? Easy, that was my very first entry on 'My Impact' app. I was a trainee at the time, still wet behind the ears gardening wise, and the very first time (out of so many that followed) volunteering at the Museum Garden. Gwen was sitting with a couple of ladies at the center of where would later become a part of the old brick path and welcomed me with such a big smile, as if meeting me was the highlight of her day, automatically accepting me into the 'clique'. I didn't know who she was at the time and what a deep connection she had to the garden, but I realized immediately that I've just met the queen bee, who was governing the hive. We kept meeting in various extension functions, and her big smile was always radiating ahead her. The last time we met was on October 7th at the ceremony of the tree planting in her honor. She was sore and frail but that radiant smile never left her face.

It can't get more "Gwenish" than that: Leave behind a legacy that symbolizes her, a beautiful tree that would outlive her for future generations to enjoy, on top of a whole trail of trees and plants she planted in all the years that she was an active Master Gardener. It has been a great privilege to have known Gwen, even if just for a fleeting moment in time. I'm grateful for her.

From Luralee Cornwell:

Gwen Ewing was the heart of the New River Valley Master Gardener Association. At every event, Gwen made an effort to have a meaningful conversation with everyone in attendance. I always wanted to be near her and enjoy her caring presence and conversation at meetings. I enjoyed serving as a member at large with Gwen, where she loved the potluck dinners, always getting excited over the desserts and cookies. I also worked with Gwen at the plant sales and Hahn Garden, and we sat together at Master Gardener College lectures. Gwen was full of knowledge. I am honored to have been her friend, and I cherish every precious memory of our time together. Happy Gardening in Heaven! NRVM-GA will really miss you! We love you!

From Hugh Osmus:

Gwen and I shared a love of working with children, showing them around the world of gardening. I think we often shared a child's vision of a garden as a place of color and smells, with butterflies and busy bees. She was able to weave the lessons of how a garden works with the joy of just being there immersed in the beauty of it. Children feel that and could see it in her smile. It was one of the many things that made her so special. She will be missed.

From Mary Osten:

A few words for a special friend...

Gwen always said an enthusiastic "Yes" when I asked her to join me in decorating our church for the holidays. Just last year, she stood at the sanctuary doors handing out poinsettias after the Candlelight Christmas Eve service.

She touched so many lives with her generous spirit. I will hold her memory close in my heart.

In loving memory...

From Steve Hale:

Gwen was a dedicated volunteer for Master Gardeners with a great sense of humor. I was donating "Fine Gardening" magazines and I had mistakenly included an AARP magazine. She never let me forget this.

RIP dear Gwen. You left an indelible legacy for which others may aspire.

From Ashley Johnson:

Gwen was one of the very first Master Gardeners I met after joining the training class in 2021. She always had a smile and a kind, encouraging word. She got to know my family and always made them feel welcome. My son, Isaac, was 7 when he met Gwen for the first time and had a new interest in basketball. A few days after he met her he said, "Mom, I'm fairly certain Ms. Gwen is probably related to Patrick." I said, "Who?" He said, "Patrick Ewing, mom! You know, the basketball player." I asked why he thought that (while attempting to not laugh). He said in complete seriousness, "They have the same last name and are both very tall." I never asked Gwen about her connection to Patrick Ewing or any other famous NBA players for that matter, but I know, in our Master Gardener world, Gwen was a star.

Everyone knew Gwen. Gwen was involved in so many projects and always the first to volunteer to help when a new need arose. You could always count on her. Gwen showed up.

Gwen and I worked together in a variety of ways: gardening in the Great Little Park and at the Montgomery Museum Garden. We served together on the NRV MGA board, sorted merchandise orders, and last year worked all day side-by-side during the seed sorting party. I can't imagine there are many Master Gardener projects in the history of NRV Master Gardeners that Gwen didn't have a part in.

Gwen was our NRV MGA historian and did a wonderful job keeping track of who we are and what we're doing throughout the New River Valley. Earlier this year, Gwen led a tour of her own project at Christiansburg Presbyterian during the April VMGA meeting. In October, she was honored for 30 years of service at the Montgomery Museum Garden with a reception and native tree planted in her honor. It was wonderful to hear the history of that garden shared by Gwen during the gathering.

Gwen set the bar high as a Master Gardener, as a community member, as a volunteer, and as a friend. She is loved. She will be missed but certainly not forgotten. Just as Gwen's tree will grow in the Museum Garden, Gwen's impact will continue to grow within the Master Gardener program.



2018 Philadelphia Flower Show. Photos: Liz Swinfin.



Gwen (foreground) when she talked us all into going to the casino in Philadelphia!

From Beth Umberger:

Gwen touched so many lives and provided emotional support as well as rides for retired professors and Montgomery Museum Garden neighbors. Spontaneous emails came from her with witty humor embedded that invited one to reply with more humor. Quirky gifts that complimented you or made a point. After leaving our house at night and being escorted to her car down a dark sidewalk, a package of solar lights appeared on my front porch. She was always inquisitive about people's lives and their families. If Gwen was not at the garden even before she became so ill, other volunteers would always ask about Gwen. The Master Gardener program gave her happiness and she returned that energy to all of us. In the meantime, I will take care of Gwen's tree as she reminded me to do after the planting and work to make the Montgomery Museum Garden a continuing project as Wendy, Gwen, and I pushed for at a meeting with museum staff this summer. For those of us who knew her, she will be always in mind as we work in the gardens she helped maintain.

From Susan Perry:

Gwen was kind and friendly to me. I liked her. She went out of her way to chat at our various events. She gave me a great bulletin board I use at project fairs, and I helped her get some of the NRV MG history loaded on the Google Drive. She created a little chart of useful MG links that I promised to put in every issue of The Grapevine. Please take a few minutes to check these links out.

Folk Life Festival at Ferrum by Erica Jones

Ferrum is a tiny, private college in the wilds of Franklin County. They offer degrees in agriculture, environmental science, and parks and recreation (among others). I went to an all-day hydroponics course there several years ago (and I tried to draft the teacher for my "Speakers List", but he said he was way too busy). He grows basically all of the lettuce the school uses. We had lunch in the school cafeteria, which sure brought back memories.

Beside the school is the Blue Ridge Farm Museum (BRIM). BRIM looks like it is doing nicely; the chinking in the log buildings looked in very good shape and was colored a medium beige. Living on the grounds were six hens, a pair of Milking Shorthorn oxen, and a resident Mammoth Jack. Of course, BRIM had a moonshine exhibit with samples. Been there, done that, thank you! BRIM was started in 1972 to document, interpret, and present folk heritage of the Blue Ridge. As an aside, Franklin County once laid claim to fame as the moonshine capital of Virginia.

The garden beds beside the log cabins had been put to bed for the winter with a generous layer of straw. Still in evidence were a few winter squash and some enthusiastic cosmos. NOT in evidence were any winter crops like kale, which was interesting.

Every year for the past 51(!) they have held a Folk Life Festival there on the (hilly) grounds spread between BRIM and the college campus. Vendors and exhibitors were down this year, but port-a-johns were plentiful.



The highlight for me was the coon mule jumping contest. (They jump the mules from the ground; this year's mules were not tacked up.) The winning jumping mule went over some 44 inches. The festival also has horticultural-themed exhibits. The most mind boggling exhibit at the Folk Life Festival was the fellow from North Carolina with samples of about 60 varieties of apples, most of which I'd not heard of. They ranged from gigantic to tiny. Interestingly, the gigantic ones were not very "apple-shaped", probably contributing to their lack of popularity. (How many people think the only apple shape is the five-lump, tapered Delicious? Spread the word!) There was also a vendor selling 10 varieties of bare root apple whips. The whips were resting in 5 gallon buckets

filled with dirt. I've never had much luck planting bare root trees in the fall, maybe due to our sporadic fall rain (five inches in three days from hurricane Helene does not do a lot of good after basically no rain for two months).

In the farm equipment area they had a steam engine that would run a belt-driven wheat thrashing machine. The size and length (and hazard) of all those long belts is impressive.

The other highlight of the trip (I went with Parks and Rec from local county; you get fabulous parking that way) was the very traditional ham biscuits—basically to die for. They offered apple cider to wash them down with. I've recovered from eating all that salt.

The Folk Life Festival also had a horse pull. This year they had about 12 teams total. That is a lot of horsepower standing around, and the pre-festival grooming was very evident.



Photos: Erica Jones

Airport Side Trip by Rona Vrooman

After picking up my sister from Piedmont Triad Airport, we drove 20 miles west to the Paul J. Ciener Botanical Garden in Kernersville, NC. If you are looking for a wedding venue, look no further! If you are near Winston-Salem or Greensboro and looking for a relaxing stroll in a beautiful setting, it's worth a side trip.



A relatively new garden, it offers about five acres of open vistas along with niches and nooks where natives and cultivars are clearly labeled. When fully developed, the garden will have more than 25 garden areas including: Piedmont Woodland, Japanese, Wetland, Conifer, Greenhouse, Amphitheater, and Children's Learning Garden.

I was immediately enthralled by the Ginkgo Tree Screen. According to garden curator Sydney Singleton, this is a type of espalier technique designed to look like windows looking into the garden. The trees were planted in 2011 and are an 'Autumn Gold' variety. When they were first planted, metal poles were placed to guide the trees and provide stability. The lower branches of the ginkgo are looped together at about three feet and then again at seven and ten feet. The resulting view is stunning.

I kept my distance when I saw multiple plantings of angel's trumpet (*Brugmansia*)—a beguiling flowering perennial. When I lived in the southwest, I knew it as sacred datura. Another hauntingly beautiful but toxic flower in bloom was red spider lily (*Lycoris radiata*). According to David Bellamy, University of California Master Gardener, the red spider lily is often linked with sad memories, such as last goodbyes or the death of a loved one.

On a more upbeat note, I moved in closer to check out true indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*). As a weaver, I am drawn to natural dye plants. The pods and tendrils left no doubt it has relatives in the pea family.



Photos: Rona Vrooman

In addition to plants, there are water features, sculptures, structures, and well-placed benches.

The web address is <https://www.cienerbotanicalgarden.org/>

Remembering Jenny by Hugh Osmus

September left us, taking with it a terrible storm. It also took our garden friend Jenny Schwanke. As I sat in the meadow where we gathered to celebrate her life and listened to the many stories of inspiration and joy, I found myself opening the book of my life. I turned to the chapter that began in the fall of 2019 when we moved to Blacksburg. As I came to the page where I met Jenny, I remembered that day clearly. Jenny was working in the food forest garden, covered in dirt and sweat from her labor, and she looked up as I approached and smiled. Somehow, she recognized that, like her, I felt most at home with my hands in the dirt. She welcomed me to the garden. The page started to fill with tears, and I knew I would not be able to speak the words I wanted so much to say. Later that evening, sitting alone, I opened my book again and began writing. I wrote of the stories I had heard that day, the stories of love and friendship, stories of inspiration and commitment to making the earth a better place. Once again, the tears began falling on the pages, but now they were tears of joy. They restored my faith and gave me strength to embrace the sorrow of her loss.



Photos: Ruth Ann Whitener

Grow a Row

by Sarah Smiley

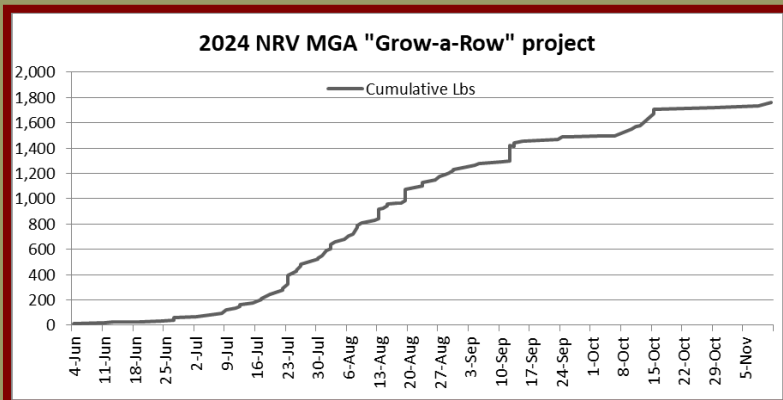
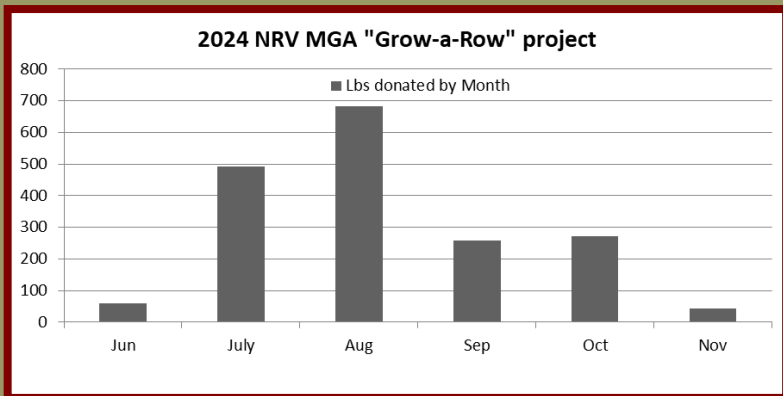
Many thanks to Jim Bixby for his great work keeping track of the data for the first NRV MGA attempt at a season-long, group Grow a Row project for all NRVMGs. My challenge to the group was to see if we could achieve 50% NRV MGA board participation and 50% member participation and contribute 1,000 lbs of produce to our communities.

We well exceeded the 1,000 lb mark, and 50% of the board participated. We didn't reach the 50% member participation, but this was a first attempt at this type of team-building project. Everyone's participation was greatly appreciated, and look at the bar chart below that Jim created to see what was accomplished!

The idea behind this, as I shared in a previous Grapevine article, was that it provided a great deal of flexibility to MGs in how they wished to contribute to this team project: working alone or in groups, at their homes or through projects, giving to whatever organization they wished, growing from June to December, etc., and earning MG hours for the effort.

This project was designed to complement the other MG projects addressing food insecurity across our communities, help fill some gaps (for example, there are no food banks in my community, so I contributed produce to those in need around me through this project), and share information with the community on this effort so they could also participate. This effort also supported one of VCE's priorities for 2024.

Jim will be keeping track of the data until December 15. Thank you again, Jim, and thanks to everyone who participated!



My New Eye Doctor by Susan Perry

This year, I changed my eye doctor. I had my first appointment with my new doctor in mid-July. The office is on Main Street in Christiansburg, just blocks from several NRVMG projects. The doctor's office is located in a great, renovated old building. The waiting room is a small area in front of a big picture window. But what does this have to do with gardening? Well, as I sat waiting, admiring the space, I noticed some amazing fake orchid plants. Only when I looked more closely, I realized they were real orchid plants. And wow, were they beautiful! So beautiful and perfect that they actually looked fake.

During my eye appointment, I kept thinking how amazing these orchids were. I learned that Rebecca was the person who took care of these amazing plants. So, at the end of my appointment, I asked to speak to her. And we agreed to meet for lunch in October so I could interview her.

I like nicknames so I call Becky "the NRV orchid whisperer." Remember that great Robert Redford movie, *The Horse Whisperer*, where Redford was able to help people and horses overcome their fears and come out the other side stronger and better? Well, I think that might be Becky. You be the judge—next summer, I encourage you to take a walk down Main Street in Christiansburg and look for the big picture window filled with beautiful orchids. No pressure, Becky!

I'm interested because I occasionally buy an orchid plant. They all have tags saying, "three ice cubes a week" is all it takes. Maybe I'm a sucker or maybe just an optimist. It's been forty-five years since my first orchid, but I have to say, I finally feel this time I will succeed, thanks to Becky.

Here are some of Becky's tips:

- Light: Orchids can flourish in filtered light or full sun. How much light an orchid gets should be a consideration in your watering regimen.
- Water: For plants in full sun, Becky waters twice a week. Since our meeting, I'm watering mine (located in filtered light) once a week. Becky recommends watering your orchid under the kitchen faucet with lukewarm water. Try to avoid wetting the leaves but make sure you water enough to see excess drain out. (You should insure you have sufficient drainage holes.) Humidity is essential, since orchids flourish in nature in tropical habitats. You can place your pot in a saucer filled with pebbles or sphagnum moss so that the plant is not directly in the water.
- Potting: The best potting medium is made of large bark chips labelled specifically for orchids. And although Becky admitted that the clear glass containers were picked for esthetic reasons, I transplanted all of mine into see-through pots because in nature, the roots are exposed to light so it probably can't hurt and might even help. Also, orchids love to be root-bound so don't go crazy.
- Fertilizing: Becky says fertilizing is not necessary if you get the other stuff right.
- Pruning: If the flower stalks are still green, don't cut them. Only cut brown, withered stalks.

Becky says you can tell orchids are happy when the plant puts out new surface roots, which are greenish, or the flower stalks put out new sprouts (mine have!). Orchids bloom when they're happy, but always have a rest period. The orchids at my eye doctor's office are resting now, probably because last summer, one plant had two flower stalks that each had six flowers. But they're happy, because they already have little buds forming.

Since I incorporated some of Becky's tips, one of my three orchid plants has developed sprouts on each flower stalk, so I think it's working. Thanks Becky!



Becky's orchids

Photos: Susan Perry



My new sprouts! Yeah!

MASTER GARDENER PHOTOS



Espaliered Ginkgo Window
Photo: Rona Vrooman



Persimmons
Photos: Sue Perry



Helping at Repair Cafe
Photo: Lynn Brammer

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Comments, questions, and submissions can be sent to Susan Perry.

A special thanks to Pat Norris for her excellent editing and to everyone who contributed to this issue of the newsletter.