

# The Grapevine

June 2024

New River Valley Master Gardener Association Newsletter

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## Congratulations Graduates

by Wendy Silverman



Back (L to R): Adam Burke, Bob Miller, Susan Sweet, Michelle Alon, Angela Scott, Helen Lyman, Jessica Gutter, Sharon Babineau

Front: Dana Kadiri, Saroja Chadalavada, Sarah Jones, Pat Norris, Charlene Flick

Not Pictured: Amanda Kelly, Penny Livesay, Melissa Neal, Dottie Rottkamp, Aaron Whiteman

## WENDY WORDS

by Wendy Silverman

### Congratulations Milestone Recipients & New Master Gardeners

#### Milestone Recipients:

- ◆ 250 hours: Karen Parker, Rona Vrooman, Amie Slate, Elizabeth Bryant, Mary Osten, Jenny Shepherd, Becky Howell
- ◆ 500 hours: Mel Flaherty, Dean Spader, Darlene Whichard, Carol Kauffman
- ◆ 1000 hours: Penny Tully, Nina Templeton, Polly Ashelman
- ◆ 4000 hours: Lynn Brammer, Beth Umberger

Congratulations to Dawn Watlington (2023), Rachael Wilkins (2023), Michelle Alon (2024), Saroja Chadalavada (2024), and Dottie Rottkamp (2024)! You are now officially Master Gardeners!

## A Fair Challenge

The New River Valley Fair runs from July 22<sup>nd</sup> through July 27<sup>th</sup>. That sounds like we have plenty of time to plan, but it isn't, especially if you are planning to enter any exhibits. The Fair accepts exhibit entries on July 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> and judging is on the 21<sup>st</sup>. In the past, only a few Master Gardeners have competed in the Fair. This year, I hope that more of us submit entries. Look at what you planted in your garden, consider what you still need to plant, and make sure you have entries that will be ready by July 21<sup>st</sup> so you can enter them.

Stan Stanley, Beth Kirby, and I have been in a friendly battle over the last few years as to which Master Gardener gets the most ribbons and prize money for our exhibit submissions. Four years ago, Stan won; 3 years ago, Beth won; and I won the last 2 years.

We need more Master Gardeners to submit their veggies, canned goods, baked goods, and crafts. It helps make a better display, and the more things you enter, the more money you win (which may pay for your gas to drop off and pick up your submissions). And of course, most importantly, if you are the winning Master Gardener, you get bragging rights for the entire year—it is time to knock me off the podium!

Here is the link to last year's fair exhibit handbook: <https://nrvfair.com/pageserver/fair-forms>. The PDF for the 2023 fair book is on the lower half of the webpage. This year's handbook isn't available yet, but it should be out soon. Things don't change much year to year, so this will give you a good idea about what you can submit.

BRING IT ON PEOPLE! JUST TRY TO END MY WINNING STREAK!



## Lollipop Trees

by Rona Vrooman

In April, I went on a river cruise through the Netherlands. While I fully expected tulips to take center stage, I was unexpectedly enthralled by the abundance of aggressively pruned trees that looked like lollipops.

I learned that this technique is called "pollarding" and is achieved by removing the upper branches of a tree. All annual (or biennial) growth is cut back to the same point on a branch, creating the bulbous pollard heads that resemble a clenched fist. The heads then sprout new growth each year. Locals told me that in the city this creates a dense shady cover in the summer while allowing light to penetrate during the winter. On farms, the trimmings are used for firewood and fed to livestock.

This pruning method dates back to medieval times and keeps trees and shrubs smaller than they would naturally grow. While it is more common in Europe, I found several US websites that describe and offer the service. To paraphrase something I saw on The Spruce website, the terms pollarding and topping are sometimes used interchangeably, but in reality, they are not the same. While both involve reducing the size of a tree, pollarding is done with a plan in mind, while topping is generally not recommended, often done out of necessity, and is considered detrimental to a tree's health. Pollarding is a specialized pruning method often considered an art form, like topiary.

Just as people have different tastes in art, one complaint about pollarding is that the trees look ugly. While you may not want the lollipop-look in your garden, Greg Crews, with Truetimber Arborists in Richmond notes, "By pollarding trees, it is possible to maintain trees in harsh urban settings. For example, in sidewalk planters, the trees are kept small by limiting their growth up to the height where the knuckles are maintained."



Photo: Rona Vrooman

## How One Little Parsley Plant Changed My Life

by Michelle Alon

Eastern Black Swallowtail



Egg starting to hatch.



Caterpillars.



Release.

A few years back, on a nice summer day, I noticed the leaves on my parsley plant were chewed.

Closer investigation revealed magnificent caterpillars that I did not recognize (yet). One thing I knew for sure: I can always get more parsley; the caterpillars were really depending on it! Then and there, they got right of passage and complete ownership of that parsley and the three more plants I got for them, because caterpillars, as we all know, are very hungry creatures.

Out of the ten, I got to see three form chrysalises, and a few weeks later, gorgeous eastern black swallowtails emerged. Two I found paralyzed by some other insect (possibly a wasp), and the rest wandered off and I did not get to see them pupate. I hope they did well.

All that evoked my curiosity, and I started learning as much as I could about butterflies: how to attract them, how to care for them, and how to give them the best chance in life.

I've explored the butterflies in my area and their host plants (where they lay their eggs and where the caterpillars feed). I learned about the life cycle of the butterflies, the 5 stages of caterpillar growth—from first instar when it chews its way out of the egg to fifth instar when it is all grown and starts to wander away from the host plant to find a good place to pupate. I've learned how to tell that the butterfly inside the chrysalis is almost ready to eclose (emerge) and even to tell the genders apart.

I've learned what host plants will attract what species and what their favorite nectar plants are. I also learned that when I offer butterflies a place to grow, it supports a whole ecosystem.

Fast forward five years: at the start of spring, my yard transforms into a wonderland and I'm walking among the plants wide-eyed, excited to discover new things. I see new species of butterflies, eggs, pollinators, and birds. I see how the blooms spread so much color and life force. I can envision my yard becoming a beacon of hope and a refuge for those critters looking for nourishment and a place where they can reproduce in safety. When I see a species I adore but don't have a host plant for, I go on a quest to find the perfect host plant for it.

There's never a dull moment here, but it is such a joyful labor of love!

There are different schools of thought about raising butterflies. Some advocate planting the host plants but then leaving the rest to nature. Others ask, "Where do you see nature?"

I see acres of wasteful lawns, manicured and chemically treated. I see bare roadsides, stripped of wild plants. I see people who are worried about the extinction of pollinators but don't see the connection between their lawns and the absence of bees.

They way I see it, if only one or two of every hundred butterfly eggs laid survive to maturity, when whole populations are declining rapidly and facing extinction, this ratio is just not good enough.

That's why I opted to be more proactive when protecting the butterflies. I give an ample supply of food and host plants, but I also harvest eggs and caterpillars and raise them in protected mesh enclosures where they are protected from predators. I keep them safe as caterpillars, making sure they have fresh leaves of their host plants and a clean enclosure daily. I keep them safe as chrysalides, and once they eclose, I set them free into a lush garden that can support their needs.

Do I interfere with nature's way? Yes, I do. But this is a drop in the sea of trying to counter-balance humankind's interference that threw this delicate balance way off.

After all, we don't do nature a favor by giving back to it. It's nature that does us a huge favor by sustaining us that far. My last words (for this article, at least): Plant it and they will come!

*\* The author is a Master Gardener, an animal lover, and a butterfly enthusiast.*

## Monarch



Chrysalis



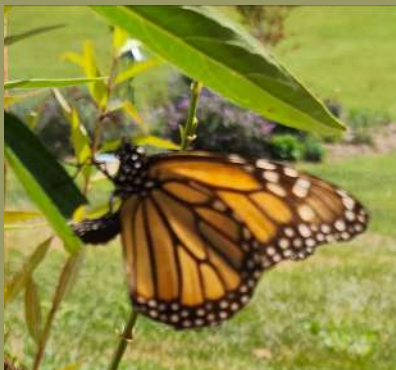
Before eclose



Caterpillar



Feeding on a zinnia



Female laying eggs



Release day!

Photos: Michelle Alon

## My Blank Slate

by Pat Norris

I love to cook. I have amassed quite a collection of cookbooks, and sometimes I even follow recipes! (Too often, my cookbooks are neglected in favor of a quick internet search.) My friends and family tell me they are happy being my culinary guinea pigs, because things generally turn out very well. What I am not good at is presentation. Maybe it comes from growing up the granddaughter and daughter of southern grandmamas and a southern mama. You learn to cook good, hearty fare; vegetables are cooked to within an inch of their lives; and gravy is often involved. It all goes on the table in serving bowls, and everyone serves themselves. No one much cares what the plate looks like. I don't actually cook like that now, but I never learned the art of presenting food on the platter or plate.

Right...this is a newsletter about gardening. I love to grow plants both inside and outside. I have my share of gardening books, and sometimes I look up how and when to prune something or I read about particular plant varieties. (And, of course, there are tons of online resources now.) I learned to garden at my daddy's side. The son of a farmer, an agronomy major in college, and a farmer himself, he has always been, in my mind, someone who knows everything one needs to know about growing things. Thanks to his teaching, I can plant and maintain with the best of them. But what I never absorbed while working at his side was what went into his decisions about what to plant and where to put them.

Fast forward to my new gardening adventures. I moved to Virginia from Michigan in 2021, and while living in a rental townhouse for two years, I grieved my Michigan yard and plants. I left behind a fully landscaped yard, some of which I designed and some of which I had a landscaping company do. My design efforts were pretty iffy, but I maintained the heck out of what the landscapers put in. I longed for another yard to work in. In August 2023, I purchased a house in Blacksburg, and I got my new space to play in the dirt. My Blacksburg home sits on a lot that is about half an acre. It has steep slopes and flat areas. There is a small woody area on the eastern edge of the lot. The front boasts a large lawn and a very large white oak with some vinca and daffodils around it. Four azaleas are planted along the north side of the house. And that is it. I have a blank slate, and design and presentation are not in my skill set. Execution I can do; artistry, not so much.

This is the personal adventure that awaits me as a newly-minted Master Gardener intern. I soaked up the information on native plants, herbaceous and woody plants, pruning, turf, plant stress, and landscape design. What have I accomplished since last August? I have made the slate blanker, actually. I removed a cypress tree planted way too close to the house on the south side, two arborvitae planted way too close to the front porch, and a holly planted between the front walkway and the garage wall that was crowding both. I removed hostas planted way too close along the deck in the back. I have cut autumn olive and dead or almost-dead ash trees out of my woods, dug out barberry and Chinese privet, and hacked away and dug at bittersweet vines, multiflora rose, and poison ivy (ugh)—leaving behind oaks, maples, blackhaws, cherries, and a dogwood I am trying to rescue from the vines.

My spring and summer activities will be planning and preparing. I am committed to creating a base map and doing a landscape design. I am going to research plant varieties and design tips. I am going to lay out and prepare the first beds. In the fall, I will plant. I have a blank slate to work on and a new toolbox to work with. By the next Grapevine issue, I will have made some decisions about what to plant where. Perhaps I'll have something interesting to share.

## Grow It and They Will Come - Part 2

by Ashley Johnson

I shared in our December 2023 *Grapevine* newsletter about growing native butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) in downtown Christiansburg's Great Little Park and how, in the first full year of this milkweed growing there, a monarch butterfly found it and laid eggs which hatched and grew into late instar caterpillars. But that is where my story ended. I had no idea if any of the caterpillars were able to make a chrysalis, or if they became a bird snack, were squished by downtown traffic, or met some other demise.

Fast forward to April 2024. We have a park workday scheduled for the first Saturday of each month, and one of the tasks on our April to-do list was to trim last year's dried flowers off the panicle hydrangea in the front of the park (the opposite corner of the park from where the butterfly weed is planted). As I was carefully cutting below last year's flowers and above this year's buds, something caught my eye: the spent chrysalis of a monarch caterpillar! I could still see the signature gold ring near the top of the chrysalis, and the bottom was split open. Not only had a monarch butterfly found our park and laid eggs, the eggs hatched, and the caterpillars developed, but now I have evidence that at least one of those caterpillars made a chrysalis and survived to eclose.

### **Cue *The Lion King's* "Circle of Life".**

An entire monarch life cycle complete in our tiny little downtown pocket park! I saved the little hydrangea stem with the chrysalis still securely attached, and I'll proudly show it to anyone who will pause long enough to look.

I've said it before and I'll say it again, grow it... and they will come.



Spent Chrysalis.  
Photo: Ashley Johnson

# How to Create a Joyful Pollinator Garden

by Michelle Alon

To paraphrase Jonas Salk (yes, the guy who developed the polio vaccine), if all insects disappeared, all life on earth will perish. If all humans disappeared, all life on earth will flourish.

Yes, my friends, it's hard to admit, but we as a species are the ones destroying the planet under our own feet and, sadly, the ones cutting the branch we are sitting on.

But what if we, as individuals, choose to make a difference, one flower bed at a time? We can choose to leave a footprint of a happy, colorful, vivid trail of pollinators, butterflies, birds, and other animals that would not have made it without us.

A good way to plan for a happy, healthy pollinator garden is to follow some magic rules of thumb:

**1. From the early bird to the late bloomers:** Let's plan for flowers to be present through all three blooming seasons, from early spring to late fall. It's a mix-and-match game and that can't go wrong, especially if we keep the rest of the rules of thumbs in mind. I can make a few suggestions, but it's pretty much a blank canvas:

- ◇ Early spring plants might include crocus, alliums, grape hyacinth, and Virginia bluebells. Violas and creeping phlox are very early to bloom and also serve as host plants. Lilacs bloom in spring and attract pollinators with their wonderful smell.
- ◇ From spring into late-summer, we have zinnias. If you asked my pollinators to vote for their favorite, zinnias would surely be on the very top of their list. I don't remember a dull moment in my zinnia patch. Hummingbirds, butterflies of all kinds, bumblebees, bees, hummingbird hawk moths, and many other pollinators were having a blast there.
- ◇ Black-eyed Susans, catmint, liatris, wild blue indigo, salvia (both perennial and annual), bee balm, and phlox bloom from mid-spring to fall.
- ◇ Goldenrod and asters take us deep into late fall and will close the veil on yet another bountiful season.

**2. Size might not matter, but shape does:** A bee might not be able to reach the nectar in a deep trumpet-shaped flower, while a hummingbird might not find it easy to get the nectar from a daisy-shaped flower. Let's plan for at least three distinctive shapes of flowers to help our little friends.

**3. Being colorful is a good thing in the garden:** Different colors attract different pollinators. Did you know that bees are not attracted to red? So ideally, having a minimum of three colors in your garden will help attract the most pollinators. Since purple and yellow are quite dominant in native plants, they should be on the menu.



**4. Perennials and annuals:** While perennials are the backbone of the garden and ensure rejuvenation every year, annuals give us freedom to be whimsical and to see what works best. Let's add a splash of color and fun in creating our pollinator garden.

**5. Butterfly heaven:** Nectar plants will serve all pollinators, but in order to procreate, our butterflies and moths need very species-specific host plants to lay their eggs on and feed the caterpillars. That often makes them very dependent on us and our gardening choices: what we plant, as much as what we weed out of our garden. Host plants can be anything from herbs and weeds to shrubs and trees.

See what butterflies visit you and which ones you want to see more of; then do some planting. Here are some potential visitors we see in our area:

- ◇ **Eastern tiger swallowtail.** *Tulip tree, wild black cherry, and sweet bay magnolia* are among the host plants of this yellow fellow.
- ◇ **Eastern black swallowtail** will host on a variety of plants from the carrot family, such as *parsley, dill, wild carrot (AKA Queen Ann's lace), carrot tops, fennel, golden alexander, cilantro, celery, and anise*. I'm not saying we shouldn't eat those herbs from our garden, but I recommend a very thorough inspection of each leaf and stem for little yellow eggs or small caterpillars. They look like bird droppings when they are young and more exotic as they develop.
- ◇ **Zebra swallowtail** will need a *pawpaw tree* as its host plant.
- ◇ **Spicebush swallowtail**, as its name suggests, will need *spicebush but also sassafras and tulip tree*. Eggs are white and round and are laid under the leaf. Caterpillars like to weave a leaf shut with silk where they hide during the day. If you see a folded leaf, you know you made it!
- ◇ **Pipevine swallowtail** will need *Dutchman's pipevine* as the host plant. It's not easy to find and it's quite a dominant vine, but the butterfly is just spectacular! The eggs are orange and laid in clusters on the upper side of leaves.
- ◇ **Monarch** butterfly. *Milkweed* in all its varieties is the host plant. The native variety we choose doesn't matter for the monarchs, they will love them all, but it might matter for our gardening preferences. Some of us will love the butterfly weed, because it's smaller and has a wonderful orange bloom. Elongated eggs will be laid on the underside of leaves.
- ◇ **Red spotted purple** butterfly. *Cherry, willow, aspens, and black oak* are amongst its host plants. Spiked round eggs will be laid at the very tip of the leaf, and while the caterpillars look a bit spooky, the butterfly that emerges is gorgeous!
- ◇ **Hummingbird hawk moth.** *Phlox* is its host plant.
- ◇ **Great spangled fritillary** and the **variegated fritillary** need *viola and pansy* as hosts.
- ◇ **Red admiral.** The nettle family is its host plant.
- ◇ **Painted lady.** *Thistles* are the host plants.

If you find a butterfly you want to attract, Google its host plant, choose the host plant you want to plant, preferably native, and go for it! Caterpillars are hungry little beauties, so one plant of each host won't be enough (unless it's a mature tree already nearby). Plan for multiple hosts and prepare to have many beautiful tenants in your garden.

**6. Native and clean:** The relationship between native pollinators and native host plants is not random. Those relationships have evolved over millennia, and they are deeply dependent on one another. Native pollinators will thrive when they get to feed on their native plants, and vice versa. They are also “programmed” to emerge when their natural plants are flowering. Would they be able to feed on other plants? They would, but would it give them the same quality nutrition? Around 50% of pollinators have faced extinction in the past 50 years or so. Let’s be the force of change.

There is also great importance to the plants being grown in optimal conditions, with minimal chemical treatment. Let’s face it; chemicals are not good for us either, but our body mass can sustain more toxins than a tiny pollinator, more so when it’s a caterpillar that feeds on the leaves. That’s why we should get plants from local, aware nurseries rather than the big gardening centers. Caterpillars also absorb chemicals through their skin, so it might be a good idea to avoid using pesticides.

**7. Easy on the blade:** Many of the next generation of pollinators that emerge in spring are hiding in plain sight during winter. Except for monarchs that are migrating south, most butterflies will be tucked inside their chrysalides or hibernacula on branches or in hidden corners of the garden, not necessarily on their original host-plants. Some others will overwinter under piles of leaves or rocks.

“Manicuring” our gardens in the fall or even too early in spring might cut the lifeline of that species and threaten the species’ chances of surviving winter. Each spring is a bit different, but overwintering butterflies would start appearing from May to July or even later. I’m not suggesting we should not trim and clean the garden before that, but it might be a good idea to pile the trimmed branches and stems at the back of our yards where viable dormant chrysalises can still survive.

Bee the change you want to see (pun totally intended). Let’s leave a blooming, buzzing, humming, chirping, and full-of-life trail as our legacy.



Pipevine swallowtail feeding.



Spicebush swallowtail caterpillar.



Red spotted purple butterfly.

Photos: Michelle Alon

## Try Something New (and Edible)

by Erica Jones

I stumbled onto a new-to-me vegetable last year, asparagus beans (*Vigna unguiculata* subsp. *sesquipedalis*). They grow like a pole bean, although they are a tad slower to fruit than some pole beans. Seems they are from the family of cowpeas; these are a subspecies of the cowpea. My seed packet merely said asparagus bean so this is the usual problem with common names: what is it REALLY?

These beans are much thinner than a green bean and much longer. They seem to hold up well on the vine; that is, they do not get tough and stringy quite as fast as most pole bean varieties. They cook in about the same length of time as regular beans but hold their shape much better. And they keep their dark green color quite well. The Wikipedia article uses the adjective "crisp," which covers it nicely. Wikipedia also mentions that they hold up better than regular green beans in the summer heat. My summers here are not blazing hot, so I couldn't field test that very well. I did water these plants a little when we had a week of no rain.

The pods hang in groups of two or more and are pretty easy to find. They are attached to the vine a bit more firmly than pole beans, so harvest requires good fingers. Pick beans carefully, as blossoms are produced on the same stem. If you tear off the ripe beans, you are tearing off all the future blossoms below that spot on the vine. I picked mine regularly, so I rarely saw bulges in the pods which come from seed formation in the older bean. The blossoms are larger than those on *Phaseolus vulgaris* (regular green beans).

The Burpee Seeds website says they are prone to typical bean diseases (mildews, etc.) and our old friend the bean beetle. For reasons not clear, my bean beetles mostly left them alone, but I just did not have many beetles at all. My seeds went in a bit late, as my first planting of pole beans did not germinate well, and the first planting did get beetles. Who knows?

The Burpee website also says "plant multiple plantings." My batch of beans kept producing all summer (once they got going) and that advice would have been superfluous. (Standard seed company advice?) Another source claims they are a good southern vegetable. I'll buy it!



Photos: Erica Jones

## From the President

by Sarah Smiley

Congratulations and a warm welcome to the new Master Gardener Interns! We look forward to having you involved in program projects and the work of the Association.

This Grapevine is well-timed for a mid-year review.

**Recalling how we started the year:** The theme for 2024 is Making Big Ideas Bloom. Last year, we responded to members' requests for improving opportunities for socializing within the Association's activities. This year, we wanted to build on that work and focus on teamwork opportunities.

As part of the teamwork goal, we established two priorities for this year: pollinators and food security, with the targets of 50% of the board and 50% of members participating.

### **What has happened since the last Grapevine:**

- ⇒ In April, we hosted the bimonthly business meeting of the Virginia Master Gardener Association in Christiansburg.
- ⇒ After months of work, in May we released the full NRVMG directory with lists of interests. Many thanks to Morgan St. Laurent, Ashley Johnson, and Susan Perry for all of their work to get this document pulled together.
- ⇒ May = our annual plant sale, and this year was another record-breaking year. Many thanks to those who grow/provide plants and those who show up to help during the week and on sale day. It is our largest teamwork effort of the year and a great way to get to know each other. Beth Kirby is our undaunted, and unpaid, leader in this effort.
- ⇒ Book club meetings and educational opportunities led by Ashley Johnson.
- ⇒ Rain barrel-making workshops led by Stan Stanley (and rain barrel cleaning efforts!)
- ⇒ Updates to the Association's Standing Rules and Bylaws (see your email, sent on May 23, as we need members to vote on adopting the bylaws).

### **What you can look forward to and how to get involved:**

**Pollinator Week**, June 17–23, will highlight NRVMG garden projects that are open to the public. We created a flyer to invite the public to visit these gardens to improve outreach and education on pollinators, MG and partner projects, and our NRVMG grant program (as almost all of these projects have received NRVMG grants).

- ⇒ I sent an email to members earlier this year asking who would like to have their projects listed on the flyer.
- ⇒ MG Bill Kealy generously donated his time and talents to design the flyer. He printed copies for handing out at the plant sale, and I have posted it on the website.
- ⇒ Each of our counties has at least one project listed.
- ⇒ On the website, I have added a page to provide more information about the projects as well as any social media links that may be useful.

- ⇒ If your project, or a partner project, is not listed on the flyer and you'd like it to be listed, I will happily add it on the website page.
- ⇒ *I encourage all of you to visit these gardens during Pollinator Week and share the flyer on your social media!*

Since you can't have food without pollinators, this effort meshes well with our food security goals.

**Grow a Row:** Earn MG hours and help feed the community. Food insecurity is a growing concern in our region, and incorporating extra produce into our gardening efforts and donating the food to a food bank or community effort can help our community.

- ⇒ Grow your produce at your home, as part of your MG project, or while gardening with a buddy, and donate the produce.
- ⇒ Please keep track of how many pounds of produce are donated and report them to Wendy or me to be included in our teamwork statistics.
- ⇒ I have a list of churches and food banks throughout our communities that I shared earlier in the year, but I am happy to share it again if anyone needs it. Many thanks to Kay Hunnings for providing the very useful list.

### **Photos!**

It is important for our program that we get the word out about our work to educate the public and encourage others to become MGs, and this includes using our social media platforms. Our platform has grown by almost 40% this year. We currently have over 1,100 Facebook followers and 939 likes. My goal is to get the feed to 1,500 followers.

- ⇒ Photos and stories of our projects elicit not only the most "likes" and shares, they also help us better inform the community of who we are, what we are doing, and how our work benefits them (and hopefully they will want to be part of our work). More photos and stories of projects are needed. Folks get busy with their work and do not want to stop to take photos, but all of our projects are great, and we need to engrain the practice of sharing what we are doing with the wider community.
- ⇒ At least once this year, send a photo and a few sentences about your project or work to me/ Ashley Johnson/Lynn Brammer or Wendy for our Facebook page and the website.
- ⇒ Like and follow our Facebook page and posts if you are on Facebook, and share our posts on your own media.
- ⇒ Take photos of your gardens that are ready for Pollinator Week. Take photos of what you are growing for Grow A Row. Send them to us, and we'll share with the public and hopefully get involvement from the wider community with these efforts.

As always, I remain amazed and impressed by the talents and generosity of our members. It is a pleasure working with you and seeing what we can grow together. I truly appreciate your time, insights, and ideas. Never hesitate to share them! We are all in this together, so let's make big ideas bloom!

## A New (to Me) Spring Shrub-Tree by Erica Jones

I got to go to New River State Park (in NC) courtesy of Montgomery County Parks and Recreation recently. We were supposedly, um, hiking. Well, it was a short stroll on one trail in the park, but that trail was absolutely loaded with spring wildflowers.

This park is one of those that comes in pieces with the more than three thousand acres divided into several areas. (If you have ever been in Cuyohoga Valley National Park, you will have experienced a similar layout spread along a river).

Given that the New River State Park provides fabulous access for folks to paddle their small boats along the South Fork of the New River, the state created multiple places to put in and out of the river. And think about it: the (silly) New River flows north and west. So the further upstream you go, the higher you go. The elevation of this state park is about 2700 feet; by contrast, Claytor Lake is at 1856 feet and the New River Gorge (National Park) has a river elevation of 745 feet at the lowest spot in the park. Some dropping down is happening here.

I was really taken with a new (to me) flowering plant. This small tree has a common name of silverbells, and it was blooming its socks off when we were there. It is common to the "southern Appalachians." I guess the mountains around here are not southern enough; at least I do not have this tree. We don't have such a nice river bottom in my back yard, either.

I thought it would be easy figuring out which *Halesia* this is. With species, maybe *H. monticola* or *H. Carolina*. But Wikipedia hints at great discord about what it really is. This debate sounds suspiciously like the chasm between the lumpers and splitters. Is this plant a NEW species, or is it just a variant of an existing species? And my copy of Field Guide to Trees does even not talk about *H. monticola*. Oh whatever...I'm sticking to common names here!

The photo below shows the other star of the park: trout lily. These come in big flocks actually, and it is rumored that only about 0.5% of plants flower in any one year. It is also said that plants have to be four to seven years old before they will flower. These can be pretty common in the right area and right time of year (before the leaves come out on the trees). Non-flowering plants will only have one of these speckled leaves showing, not two. This plant was along the river bottom and further up some slopes (generally in very wooded locations).

The Missouri Botanical Garden says it goes dormant by late spring and has no serious pest problems. When you see them, they are obvious, but you have to time your search carefully.

Maybe you don't think that a lowly state park would have such nice wildflowers, but not so. (Even Pandapas Pond is awash right now in a low-growing early iris.) These flowers in the park were at Wagoner Access Rd. (and park office): GPS 36.415826903176885, -81.3866259735794 on the Fern Nature Trail.



Photos: Erica Jones

## Tulip Time

by Rona Vrooman

After several days of rainy, windy weather in Holland, the sun came out the day I visited Keukenhof Gardens. Imagine 79 acres of more than 7 million tulips displaying every shape, size, and color. Here are just a few of the breathtaking flowers:



Keukenhof is only open for a brief time during the year so I urge you to plan ahead.



*Rona Vrooman (left) and her sister Karen*

*Photos: Rona Vrooman*

## **“I mean, just look at this thing. I can’t imagine a more beautiful thing…”**

by Morgan St. Laurent & Ashley Johnson

Last year, we declared okra the plant of the year. During the December seed sorting party, we sorted lots and lots of corn packets so we are happy to announce 2024 is “Year of the Corn.” Come by the Master Gardener office and grab some corn seed packets to begin your corn journey.

Do you remember the first time you ever tried corn on the cob? I (Ashley) can’t remember when I first tried it, but I can vividly recall the first time I offered corn to my son, Isaac. It was during family vacation in Destin, Florida. We went out to dinner and enjoyed a low country boil. Isaac was one year old, and corn on the cob seemed like the perfect food to offer him. He could easily hold it and nibble away while Dave and I had a moment to eat. Isaac didn’t just like it, he LOVED it. He loved it so much, he ate every kernel off that cob and then refused to let it go. After the meal ended, we suggested he leave the corn cob at the restaurant, and he had a total tearful meltdown. So, he went home to the beach house with his beloved corn cob in tow!



Have you heard of seven-year-old Tariq, the “corn kid” from YouTube? He’s older than Isaac was at the beach, but has the same excitement and affection for corn on the cob. With a simple YouTube search for “Tariq corn kid”, you can watch the interview that turned Tariq into an internet sensation and earned him the title of “corn-bassador”. As Tariq says, “I mean, just look at this thing. I can’t imagine a more beautiful thing. It’s corn!”

### **How to Grow Sweet Corn**

Now is the time to plant corn!

You can sow it directly in your garden (or even a raised bed), which is usually the method written on seed packets. But I prefer to start corn inside in a 72-count cell tray. It sprouts quickly and can be transplanted out in just a few weeks. Starting the seeds inside also prevents birds from plucking up the freshly sprouted seedlings to eat the seeds attached.

It is important to plant corn in a block of at least 4 parallel rows rather than a long, single row. Corn is wind pollinated, rather than insect pollinated like many other garden vegetables, so planting in a block helps improve pollination. Remember, no pollination = no corn kernels.

Rather than planting all your corn at one time, this is the perfect crop for succession planting. Plant a small block now, and then in 2–3 weeks plant another block. This allows you to spread out the harvest and enjoy freshly picked corn throughout the summer.



Check the “days to harvest” on the specific type of sweet corn to see how many times you can succession plant before the growing season ends.

### How to Use Corn – #1 Eat it!

Here's a favorite summer dip recipe starring, you guessed it, CORN! (And several other garden veggies.) Plus, this recipe is quite simple to make and perfect for summer cookouts and potlucks.



### Yummy Summer Dip

#### Ingredients:

8 oz. Philadelphia Reduced Fat Cream Cheese, softened

1 package ranch seasoning mix

1 red bell pepper, finely diced

1 orange bell pepper, finely diced

1 jalapeno, finely diced (leave seeds for more kick)

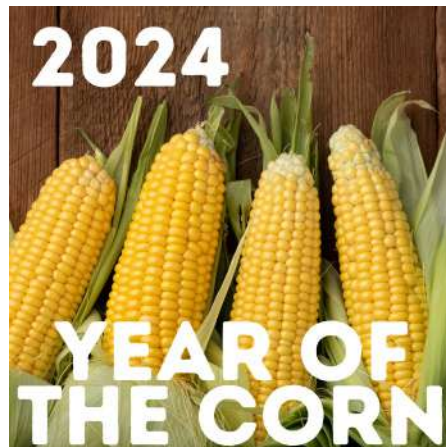
1 small can black olives, chopped

1 pint corn (cooked and removed from cob) or 1 (15 oz.) can of corn, drained

#### Directions:

- In a medium bowl, add cream cheese and ranch seasoning. Mix well.
- Add all other ingredients to bowl and stir until well coated.
- Serve immediately with your favorite chips (I prefer tortilla scoops) or store covered in the refrigerator for up to 24 hours (stir before serving).

Even if you don't want to grow corn to eat, go ahead and start growing it. The fall Grapevine newsletter will include more ways to use it.



*Photos: Ashley Johnson*

## Plenty! Farm Update

by Rona Vrooman

Thanks to a New River Valley Master Gardener Association (NRVMGA) Community Grant, we provided cool weather vegetable plants during pantry hours at Plenty! Farm in Floyd on April 11, 2024.

Elizabeth Bryant, Susan Sisk, and Rona Vrooman braved the rain and distributed seeds, plants, and information to approximately 80 neighbors. Thanks to donations from Crows Nest Greenhouse (Blacksburg) and Dulaney's Greenhouse (Floyd), as well as home-grown starts, people could choose a container or plants to direct sow in their garden. In addition, several young people gained first-hand experience in transplanting.



Rona Vrooman



Susan Sisk



Transplanting

## A Mother's Day Wish Only a Gardener Would Appreciate

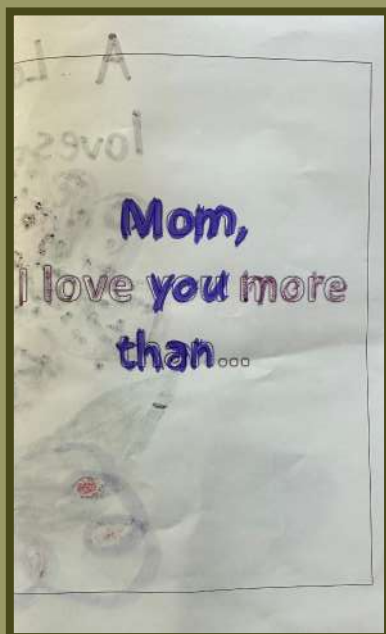
by Ashley Johnson

During children's church on Mother's Day this year, the leaders at our church helped all the kids make Mother's Day cards. They had pre-printed, "Mom, I love you more than..." on the front of the card and encouraged the children to complete them with something related to their mom for the inside of the card. Suggested examples included, "Mom, I love you more than ... peanut butter loves jelly" or "Mom, I love you more than ... macaroni loves cheese".

As many of you know, my kids spend a lot of time in the garden with me, so Ellie, my eight-year-old daughter, found the perfect way to complete the Mother's Day wish for me.

"Mom, I love you more than ... a ladybug loves aphids."

A sentiment you'll probably never see in a Hallmark card and yet it was perfect!



Photos: Ellie & Ashley Johnson

# VMGA Visits the NRV



Floral Arranging Class

L to R: Judy Rea, Ashley Johnson, Jessica Frank, Jessica Miller (Roanoke MG), Charlene Flick, Susan DiSalvo, Wendy Silverman, Kay Hunnings, Dottie Rottkamp, Helen Lyman



Photos: Donna Cunningham



## Hale Community Garden Update

by Hugh Osmus & Polly Ashelman

NRV Master Gardeners, in cooperation with the non-profit Live, Work, Eat, Grow (LWEG), have some updates to share about our work at the Hale Community Garden, located at 215 Maywood Street in Blacksburg.

We have two relatively new gardens established: a Pollinator Garden and a Children's Garden. A project to build a display case for the Pollinator Garden is underway, thanks to a grant from the New River Valley Master Gardener Association (NRVMGA).

Some news from our Children's Garden project:

This year we are changing the theme. We are calling this year's garden an English cottage garden. It will include many of the features we used last year, and we will again focus on providing a demonstration garden for children and families. This is open to the public and free. We will also be donating the veggies we grow to Share the Spare and other non-profit efforts to support the disadvantaged in our community.

To extend our outreach we have created a brochure for the garden and a poster providing directions and general info about our project. We hope this brochure can become a model for all MG projects. A big thanks to Claudia Levi for putting it together.

An added feature this year is our display case cottage. Built with funds provided by a NRVMGA grant, the cottage was constructed using recycled materials. It contains a lower storage area for extra supplies and a first aid kit. The upper section contains MG brochures on a range of topics, such as our plant clinics and our Children's Garden brochures. It also has a wall for posting pictures of our events and for showing the progress of the garden through the seasons. A highlight of this year's theme will be a garden within a garden, showcasing a variety of edible flowers.

We hope you'll drop by for a visit!



Photos: Susan Perry

The New River Valley Master Gardeners Association  
Invites you to get outside for

# Pollinator Week

## June 19-25



### **GILES** - *The Giles County Community Garden* -

529 Wenonah Ave, Pearisburg, VA, near the courthouse. Received NRV MGA grants to support their work teaching sustainable gardening techniques, improving the environment for pollinators and improving food security for the community.

### **CRAIG** - *Maywood Garden Club Triangle Garden* -

intersection of Rt 42 and Northside road, 11.7 miles from downtown Newport. Presents a focus on native plants and pollinators.

**FLOYD - PLENTY!** Location: 192 Elephant Curve Road, Floyd, VA. 24091. NRV MGA's plan and maintain the Small Space Demonstration Garden and educates on the need to support native pollinators.

**Ecovillage Educational Garden** - 718 Franklin Pike SE, Floyd. This project educates visitors and maintains the learning garden and the village farm.

**Floyd Center for the Arts Pollinator and Butterfly Garden** - 220 Parkway Ln S Ste 1, Floyd, VA 24091, provides education and is a source of inspiration.

### **MONTGOMERY** - *Live Work Eat Grow Pollinator*

**Garden!** 215 Maywood St, Blacksburg. The purpose of the project is to supply pollinators with ample food sources, host plants, and nesting spaces and educate the community.

**Great Little Park On Main** - 100 W. Main Street, Christiansburg. A community pocket park that focuses on creating a sustainable environment for pollinators and an educational and enjoyable area for the community.

**The Montgomery Museum Garden** - 300 Pepper Street in Christiansburg. The lower garden is dedicated to Eastern United States natives. The upper garden is a mix of summer annuals, ornamental vegetables and herbs, perennials, and ground covers that are native and non-native.

**PULASKI - The Children's Zoo Garden** of the Pulaski County Library, main entrance is located at 60 3rd St NW, Pulaski. Many bright, happy plants to entertain and educate children and encourage pollinators that are needed for the vegetable and herb gardens.

**Heritage Park Pollinator Garden** - located on Dora Highway. NRV MGA community grants helped start and support this Friends of Peak Creek project. Highlights the importance of native plants to improving the health of the area around Peak Creek.

**Monarch Waystation** - Pulaski Bike Park, 1990 E. Main Street. Supports Friends of Peak Creek's mission of habitat improvement along the creek along with educational outreach, strategically placed adjacent to the waterway to encourage people to visit the stream.

Want to know more about these gardens? Visit our website ([www.nrvmastergardeners.com](http://www.nrvmastergardeners.com)) and FB page @New River Master Gardeners Association, for more information and links.



## Success

by Erica Jones

Years ago when I bought seeds from Park Seed Company (<https://parkseed.com>), I bought a book called *Park's Success with Seeds* (copyright 1978). It musta just been published. In any case, it is divided into six chapters. The first ones give you information on starting seeds. The last two chapters are divided into ornamentals and then edibles. Entries are by Latin names, and using this book WILL get you to brush up on your nomenclature. Don't worry, there is a cross reference index in the back.

Each (seed) listing has genus/species, common name(s), annual/perennial/biennial, and zone. Then you get habitat, germination, culture, and harvesting (for the edibles). There are occasional notes at the bottom, like EASY (spoiler -- tomato/Lycopersicon does NOT say EASY). You can also find interesting comments, like in the spinach section. The book mentions that you get faster germination with higher heat, while at cooler temperatures, more seeds germinate.

Yes, you get temperature ranges for germination. Yes, you get how long things take to germinate. Yes, you get hardiness zone. Did you know cacti germination is "erratic" and can take from 5 days to several months?

I checked my used internet book supplier, and they have two copies of it. I did not see it, after a very brief search, on the Parks' website. It is probably not a high-volume publication.



# MASTER GARDENER PHOTOS



Toni Pitts



Pat Norris



Toni Pitts

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**Website:** [www.nrvmastergardeners.com](http://www.nrvmastergardeners.com)  
**VCE Montgomery County Office:** 540-382-5790



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

Thank you to everyone who contributed to this issue of the newsletter.

A special thanks to Pat Norris!