

THE GARDEN GATE

A Community Newsletter by the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners

Winter 2025



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Welcome, everyone, to the Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners' community newsletter. Each month we will be bringing you relevant seasonal horticultural information for Rockbridge County. If you enjoy this newsletter, please pass it on. Subscription information is on the last page of this newsletter.

FREE SEEDS, SAT. JANUARY 18TH, 10am, RARA COMMUNITY ROOM

Once again, our RAMGA Seed Savers Group will be presenting our annual seed event, open to RAMGA members and the public on Saturday, January 18th in the RARA Piovano Building in Lexington between 10 am and noon. We will feature over 100 species of plant seeds that our project members have harvested, processed, and packaged. In addition, we will be distributing seeds generously donated by several commercial seed suppliers and individual community donors. Master Gardeners will be on hand to answer your seed-related questions, and we will have informative handouts and examples of seed starting equipment.

Our Seed Library (available on the RAMGA website) will be updated in January to include this year's featured species. Information includes plant descriptions, pictures, cultural requirements, instructions on planting, and links for additional information. A visit to the library is highly recommended before the seed event to help in your selections, and again later in the year when you are ready to plant.

So, mark your calendar and plan on stopping by to pick up some free seeds and enjoy socializing with your fellow gardeners.

UPCOMING GARDENING EVENTS

1. [Facebook LINK for Virginia Native Plant Society Group](#)

7th Annual Prince William Native Plant Symposium

February 8, 2025

“Stop Mowing, Start Growing:

A Native Plant Symposium for Beginners and Beyond”

Keynote Speaker: Doug Tallamy

<https://pwconserve.org/staging/3382/native-plant-symposium-2025/>

2. Loudoun County Plant Nurture Grow - 14th Annual Gardening Symposium

Saturday, March 22, 2025

9:00 am to 3:00 pm

Academies of Loudoun

[42075 Loudoun Academy Drive](#)

[Leesburg, VA 20175](#)

Please join the VCE Loudoun Master Gardeners for this wonderful educational event. Four prominent speakers will share their knowledge and inspire us as we prepare our gardens for the spring and subsequent growing seasons. Featured Speakers and Programs:

- Thomas Bolles and Mary Sketch Bryant, “4 The Soil”
- Brie Arthur, “Aromatic Symphony: Captivating Garden Fragrances” and “Foodscape Harmony: Embracing Natives and Edibles”
- Janet Draper, “Chasing New Knowledge Among Perennial Change”

The symposium will also feature a marketplace with gardening items from local vendors and lightly used books. Visit bit.ly/MGSymposium2025 for more details, including speaker bios and an event schedule. Register before tickets sell out!

Registration opens on January 9, 2025

Tickets start at \$65*

*Additional fee for Panera lunch option. Attendees are welcome to bring their own lunch.

3. Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia is offering a Youth Education Program! (YEP!)

The [LINK](#) is interesting and might give ideas to parents or grandparents. The website also offers dates and locations for demonstration gardens that might be new to you.

4. Virginia is for Gardeners is offering a lot of information about resources for the future that might be good for which to know and plan. Their website [LINK](#) is interesting.

5. For more webinars and reading suggestions offered by various agencies, please click on the Virginia Cooperative Extension and Extension Master Gardeners [LINK](#) here.

6. Thursday, February 13, Paramount Theatre, Charlottesville. [40th Annual Piedmont Landscape Association Seminar](#), “The Ecological Landscape”.

This year’s speakers include:

- **Hannah Lewis:** Using Mini-Forests to Rewild our Communities for Climate Resistance
- **Harland Patch:** The Biodiverse Pollinator Garden: Lessons from Research & Practice
- **Paul Tukey:** The Sustainable Art of Lawns and Landscape
- **Paul Westervelt:** The New Perennial Movement & Why It Matters

WINTER GARDEN TASKS

- Clean, sharpen, and organize garden tools.
- Christmas tree branches make great mulch.
- Try and resurrect your amaryllis bulb. More on this in next month’s issue as I try and resurrect a waxed amaryllis bulb.
- Winter is always a good time to clean and sharpen your garden tools.
- Walk your garden and make notes for 2025 improvements.
- Start a garden journal.
- Binge on seed catalogs and send away for some new ones. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange catalog comes out of Mineral, Virginia about 45 minutes west of Charlottesville.
- Heavy snow and ice will damage evergreens. The weight of the precipitation can easily break branches. I use a broom to knock the snow off the branches I can reach.

INVASIVE OF MONTH: A New Series by Louise Brennan

Epipactis helleborine

Most of us know all too well the big bullies who continually invade our forests and gardens: autumn olive, ailanthus, Japanese honeysuckle, and the like. But there are some plants that are perhaps even more insidious, hiding under shady shrubs or on the edges of hiking trails. Broad-leaved helleborine is one of these.

Epipactis helleborine, or Broad Leaved Helleborine, is a non-native orchid, originating in Europe but with a wide distribution across eastern and central Canada and the United States. Also known as Eastern Helleborine, Weed Orchid, and Helleborine Orchid, this wicket little orchid was first introduced from Europe to the United States as an ornamental; it was first reported near Syracuse, New York, in 1879. Growing 1-3 feet high, it has a light green stem with short hairs, alternate oval to lance-like leaves that clasp the stem, and small greenish purple flowers which appear in a spike-like cluster of up to 50 flowerets! The edges of the leaves are often slightly wavy, sometimes turning purple as they mature. The flowers appear in late July and August.



I first noticed one of these pests in my Lexington garden two years ago; then last summer I found 3 of them in my New Hampshire garden; this year my New Hampshire garden had 12. Yikes. This plant is notoriously difficult to eradicate: one website reports that “There are only two things you can do in an attempt to keep this orchid under control: First, dig deeply to remove every bit of root you can find, taking into account that the fleshy rhizomes can extend more than 4 inches into the soil, and dig again whenever new plants surface.” Another source advises gardeners to dig them when they begin to flower, in hopes that their roots and rhizomes are at their weakest. The problem is you have to get all of the root/rhizome system, which is not an easy task. Interestingly, this plant contains three toxic ingredients: glycosides, which can cause the heart to slow down, saponin which acts on the nervous system to cause drowsiness, and helleborine in the roots that may cause vomiting or diarrhea when ingested. Some experts warn that it can be particularly dangerous to dogs. Currently it has not made most of the invasive lists in Virginia, but it has become a major pest in Wisconsin and is spreading quickly in New England. My advice is to be on the lookout; if it can quadruple its presence in one year in NH, then it is probably headed our way. Currently, some experts call it “the orchid from Hell.”

If there is an invasive you'd like to find out more about, contact Louise at Louise.g.brennan@gmail.com

THE ORNAMENTAL GARDEN

The Lowly Hackberry

By Louise Brennan

In the back corner of my yard in Lexington grow three or four small scrubby trees. I had paid them little mind until, a year or so ago, one of our favorite tree guys (who had come to tend to our aging locust) pointed them out: "Hackberry," he said. "A good native tree."

In a recent article in the *New York Times* (9/9/24), Margaret Renkl agrees and bemoans their status in her home state of Tennessee as "trash trees." Yes, she admits, they have gnarly, warty bark; their leaves turn a sickly yellow in the fall (unlike their beautiful neighbors which show off their oranges and reds), their limbs can overhang houses and be vulnerable in a big storm, and they attract a pesty aphid (the Asian wooly hackberry aphid). As she bluntly puts it, "Their pocked, wrinkled, gall-infested leaves always look a little sick. In spring, their flowers drop to the ground and cover the sidewalks, and in fall their berrylike drupes do the same, without any gorgeous fall color to compensate for the mess." Scott Beuerlein, a horticulturist at the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens adds, "Hackberry leaves are puckered, pimples, and even in the peak of health are a sick yellow green. In the fall, they change to a color that makes you think the patient took a terrible turn for the worse."

They sound like total losers, right? Even their name is a problem: Does it make you think about a bad cough that struggles to "hack" up phlegm? Or of someone trying to "hack" into your email? There's even speculation, according to Brenna Anstett in LEAF, that their name derives from "hag," a Scottish word meaning witch.

But Renkl quickly comes to their defense, pointing out that these warty, ungainly trees support a host of wildlife, especially in the late summer and early fall. Local birds "need to fatten up for the cold winter ahead, and migrators for their long journey. The hackberry is the host plant for dozens of lepidoptera species: 49 here in Tennessee." Doug Tallamy reports that they support 43 species of caterpillars in the mid-Atlantic region. Butterflies include the tawny emperor, the



question mark, the mourning cloak and the hackberry emperor which has the charming habit of lighting on your skin to nibble at the salt and minerals. As Renkl points out, “This behavior is called puddling, and many butterfly species can be found puddling in the mud. Hackberry emperors will puddle right on your hand.” (See photo to the left of one puddling on the leg of a friend of mine.)

Hackberries nourish mammals as well. Their drupes (a maroon-colored berry) are an important food source for mammals, birds, and reptiles—and even some adventurous humans! Their taste is described as sweet and buttery by the brave people who have tried them; they were made into pemmican and used for medicinal purposes by many Native American peoples.

Renkl concludes her praise of the hackberry in an homage to their beauty and usefulness: “The tree’s greatest benefit may be those great, reaching limbs. Hackberries are fast growing, drought tolerant and happy in even seemingly inhospitable settings. Best of all, they sequester carbon, mitigate storm runoff and provide a lovely shade that will cool us just as the planet is growing intolerably hot.” And the Nebraska Forestry Service adds: “Hackberry may be the king of hard-working trees. It can provide a canopy of shade for decades at a time and ask for almost nothing in return. Additionally, its deep root system makes common hackberry useful for preventing soil erosion on disturbed sites.”

It remains true that the hackberry is no beauty. Beuerlein compares it to one of Dickens’ street urchins—with the reminder that those are often the more lovable and interesting of Dickens’ characters (sometimes even the hero). Unfortunately, it’s hard for them to be heroic in our urban landscape where, as Renkl points out, they are the first trees that developers remove and that unknowing gardeners cut down. But for some of us, there’s a renewed respect for this humble, gnarly, unimposing tree; it makes me (along with the birds, butterflies, insects, and mammals living nearby) happy to have it in my yard.

RECIPE

Winter is the season for soups and the following is one I have been making for many years, adapted from an old (very old) *Bon Appetit* recipe. It is quick and easy and most of the ingredients can be found in your pantry. I use frozen corn from my summer harvest, but supermarket frozen corn is fine. I am sure anyone from Mexico would scorn this soup. It is not authentic, but it is delicious.

Mexican Corn Soup

3 ½ cups frozen corn kernels

1 cup chicken stock

½ stick butter

2 cups milk

2 garlic cloves, minced

1 teaspoon oregano

Salt and freshly ground pepper

2 Tablespoons canned chiles, rinsed and diced

1 whole chicken breast, boned and chopped (or use the meat from a rotisserie chicken)

1 cup diced plum tomatoes or small diced canned tomatoes

1 cup shredded Monterey Pepper Jack cheese

Handful of chopped cilantro

Garnish with baked tortilla strips – stack 6-8 corn tortillas and cut into thin ½” strips. Arrange on a cookie sheet and spray with olive oil cooking spray. Bake at 375 degrees for about 6 minutes. Rotate the pan and bake for another 6 minutes.

1. Combine corn and chicken stock in a blender or food processor and puree.
2. In a 3 qt. saucepan combine the butter and corn mixture and simmer slowly about 5 minutes. Add the milk, garlic, oregano, salt and pepper and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, add chiles and simmer for 5 Minutes.
3. Divide chicken and tomatoes among 6 bowls. Remove soup from heat, add the cheese and stir until melted. Ladle into bowls and sprinkle with chopped cilantro and the baked tortilla strips.

Is It Spruce, Pine, or Fir? (A Kid Friendly Activity)

By Tamara Teaff

During the Holiday season, you hear people refer to any conifer as a Christmas tree or

a pine tree. If that statement describes you, now is the time to teach yourself (and any young naturalists in your life) how to distinguish between spruce, pine, and fir trees. With many of our trees devoid of leaves, the evergreens are easy to spot and identify.

Just like deciduous trees, conifers can be identified by their leaves. Actually, the leaves of the spruce, pine, and fir are really called needles. Pine tree needles are attached to the branches in clusters of two, three, or five depending on the type of pine tree group to which it belongs. Both the spruce and fir trees have their needles individually attached to the branches.

Pine tree. Clusters of needles. Easy.

Now how do you tell spruce and fir trees apart?

- Clue #1 Spruce needles are pointed, kind of sharp, and square in shape. They can easily be rolled between your fingers.
- Clue #2 Fir needles are softer, flat, and cannot be rolled.

A good mnemonic is “Spiky Spruce, feathery Fir”

- Pine- clustered needles
- Spruce- individually attached needles that are pointy, square, and can roll between your fingers
- Fir- individually attached needles that are softer, flat, and cannot be rolled.

On your next walk, either alone, with your kids, or grandkids, try getting to know our conifer friends personally and greet them by name.

Reference: *Dirr’s Encyclopedia of Trees and Shrubs*. Michael A Dirr. 2011.



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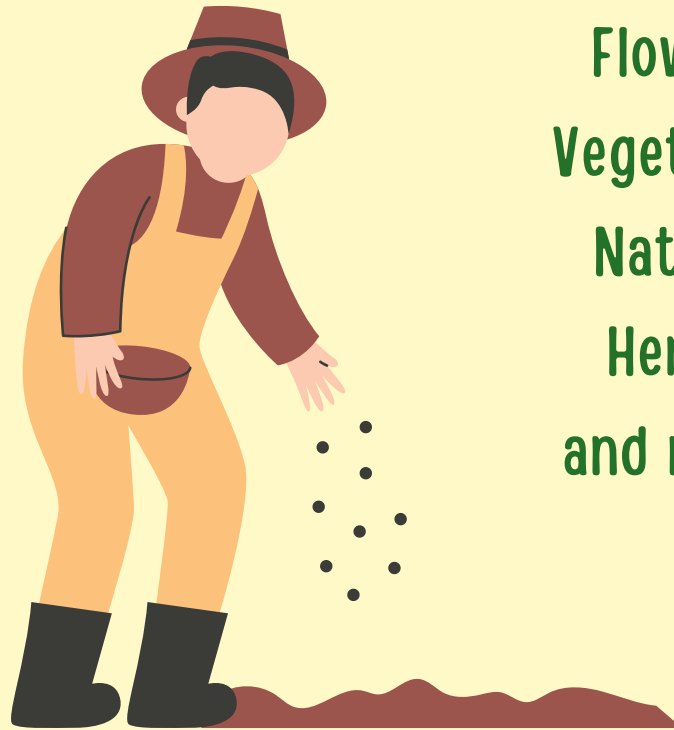
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To subscribe: <https://www.ramga.org/newsletter-the-garden-gate>

Rockbridge Area Master Gardeners
2025 Seed Giveaway

Saturday, January 18th

10am to Noon

RARA Community Room, 350 Spotswood Dr.



Flowers
Vegetables
Natives
Herbs
and more!



