

October 2024

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Submissions due the 20th of the
preceding month.

Into the Garden

Leadership Team Letter

Jan Smith and Vicki Hall

Unfortunately for readers, Vicki is away on family business and the LT column falls to me. Fall clean-up was a topic suggested to me by our newspaper editor, Faith Vosburgh. I am the wrong person for this topic! I don't do much - purposefully. As it turns out, being messy is good for wildlife.

I leave the leaves where they fall. Unlike monarchs, most of our moths and butterflies overwinter here either as adults or in pupal form. And when leaves fall, so do they. So, leave the leaves to blanket and protect them over the winter. But I understand as a former city person with a tiny yard, that may not be feasible. In the city, I carefully raked leaves to the sides and corners of my small yard and then guiltily, had to rake most to the street.

And then whether to cut back stems or not. Not cutting would be the best answer for wildlife. [Save the stems publication](#) says many hollow or pithy plant stems and branches provide great places for cavity nesting insects to overwinter. And many bee species deposit their eggs in

pithy stems. Small carpenter bees use old dead raspberry stems, tiny yellow faced bees use bee balm or rose stems, and



larger leaf cutter bees use native thistles or cup plant. Small wasps and spiders also use dead stems. I try not to cut stems at all but do have to trim the floppy stems in the spring. Leaving stems helps to hold upright my taller plants. And a friend leaves her dead hydrangea stems as deer deterrent – those pokey old stems at least slow the deer down.

My exception to not cutting in the Fall is Faith's Cup Plant. I call it that since she suggested it years ago as an amazing pollinator. Later I find out she has taken it out because it spreads aggressively (note from Faith: I have hundreds now instead of thousands). Amazing seeds. What was I thinking planting it near my veggie garden. So, it gets cut back in Fall and I leave about 2' of stems.



Cup plant before and after cutting



At the Waynesboro symposium, I asked Heather Holm, a native bee and wasp expert, about the Chelsea Chop – cutting back plants in late May through mid-June to reduce flopping. I wondered whether that would extend the bloom time beyond the time when any native bees would be nectaring. She was okay with doing about half the plants. Her guess was that in today’s climate weirdness, extending bloom time might be good. But more research is needed.

And speaking of Heather Holm, she has worked with others to put together a great 2-sided poster that I think is great for all yards but particularly city yards. [Keystone plants and soft landings](#) has beautiful graphics. Plant native plants under a native tree to reduce mowing and make a soft landing for overwintering bugs. It also explains the concept of Keystone species which are those natives that support the most lepidoptera and specialized bee populations. For Virginia’s ecoregion, [NWF keystone plants Ecoregion 8](#) oaks of course support the most species. Asters and goldenrods are at the top for bees and even the much-maligned pasture flower wingstem (*Verbisina alternifolia*) is listed. A great plant for your pasture; not your house garden.

As a conference speaker once summed up his talk, “Leave your OCD nature for your vegetable garden”. Speaking of, I need to rip out my tomato and squash vines soon. It is officially fall and with that comes shorter days, cooler nights, and colorful foliage!

Jan and Vicki

Recommend RAMGA to a Friend

Do you have a friend or neighbor with whom you have talked about becoming a Master Gardener?



As you know, becoming a Master Gardener volunteer requires an entire year of preparation, which includes components of horticultural online study as well as hands-on labs. Registration for the class opens on Sunday, October 27 at noon and ends on Saturday, November 2 at noon. The cost of the class is \$150 which includes the online version of the Master Gardener Handbook and lab materials. Registration for the class may be found at the RAMGA website.

www.ramga.org/join-us .

There is an evening Informational Zoom session planned to further explain the requirements of the training class to be held on October 17th. Registration to attend is on The www.ramga.org website.

RAMGA FYI

1. Don't forget our annual RAMGA Fall Potluck, noon – 2:30pm, Saturday, October 5 at Robertson Park. Families are invited. Bring a dish to share. Here is the [SignUpGenius link](#) to sign up for your dish if you haven't already.



2. Congratulations to Jeff Young on attaining his 50 hours! He is now a certified Master Gardener. Jeff received his certificate while volunteering at Boxerwood Garden and Nature Center.

3. NEW: Here is the link to the [2024 RAMGA September Board minutes](#)

Jeff proudly displays his new MG certificate!



RAMGA PROJECTS

Waddell Elementary Garden News

By Tamara Teaff

As second graders, the now third graders planted seed potatoes. Recently, the students returned to the garden to harvest the potatoes. Pictured are students digging for the potatoes along with RAMGA garden team leader, Catherine Siegel, as she reviews the parts of the potato plant.





Natural Bridge Elementary School Garden News

By Tamara Teaff

The third graders are learning about the importance of soil in their school garden. They were surprised to discover that their lunch food scraps are composted to become soil. Pictured is Master Gardener, Cynthia Roberts, showing the students the composting machine used in the process along with the composted food scraps turned into soil.

RAMGA MASTER GARDENERS in the Community

RAMGA Waste Reduction Team

By Tamara Teaff

The RAMGA Waste Reduction team has had a busy summer and fall. In partnership with Rockbridge Conservation, they built a composting station at the site of the Glasgow Farmers' Market and were



present several Saturdays to instruct in the art of composting. The partnership expanded to Kerr's Creek Farmers' Market and Season's Yield Bread Days. The Compost Coaches have had dozens of fruitful conversations with both new-to-composting and experienced composters at these Farmers' Markets. Connections to the art and science of composting have been made and the team's reputation as problem solvers continues as relationships are formed.

Marybeth Sharkey demonstrates the soil food web chart

Phyllis Fevrier, Marybeth Sharkey, and Catherine Campbell represented RAMGA at the Rockbridge Regional Fair on Friday, September 13. Their presentation titled "Composting and Soil Health Learning Lab" was held in the Reel Arena. Pictured are Marybeth with her soil food web chart and Phyllis with her friendly composting worm. It was noted that the kids loved finding worms in sample bins

Phyllis Fevrier and her composting worm



RAMGA PROGRAMS

Blueberry Program, 9.14.24

The Rise of Blueberry Hill at Stillhouse

A Review of the RAMGA September Program

By intern, Jennifer Olewine

On Saturday, September 14, 2024, in the Piovano Room at the Rockbridge County Library, Mr. Steve Donald educated and entertained a full house of curious blueberry enthusiasts. The audience listened as he told the story of the rise of Blueberry Hill at Stillhouse in Lexington, Virginia. This farm originated as the Donald family's labor of love. It was the brainchild of Steve as a retirement project, originally led and tended by his father.

Starting in November 2009 on pastureland, 48 blueberry plants went into the ground, without any soil testing or soil amendments. Steve quickly learned that some amending would need to be done. In the fall of 2010, pine bark (four tractor trailers full) and loads of peat moss were tilled into the soil. Ready for a larger crop, 1000 blueberry plants were sowed in one weekend that December. They planted until ten pm one night, only stopping because the ground was covered in snow, and the rows were no longer visible!



In 2011, dry conditions and weeds were the biggest challenge. Hand-picking of the weeds evolved into burning them with propane, and the very dry season was managed with the installation of the farm's irrigation system. But it was in 2012 that Blueberry Hill really "found its thrill" and started producing berries! By 2013, about one hundred pounds of berries were enjoyed. The farm opened for business in 2014, when Steve officially retired. The berries first appeared for sale at farmers' markets but then went on to become strictly the "U-pick" system used today. Production quickly increased over the years. In 2017, three thousand pounds were picked, and this has steadily increased to this year's volume of four thousand five hundred pounds of berries!

Perhaps the most valuable lesson (and I suspect many of us can relate) was the importance of testing the soil, amending the soil, more soil testing, and then testing again. Blueberries need soil with a high (or acidic) pH and low calcium saturation. The importance of this was evident when Steve started using the benefit of drone pictures of the farm. He could see areas (sometimes within the same row) of inconsistent growth and production. He labeled these areas "dead zones" and began more and more soil testing, much like that of a very pleasant, curious, determined farmer-scientist! And what he found was that these dead zones had pH levels that would stay in the mid-6 to mid-7 area despite the same amount of care and attention he was giving to the plants that were thriving with ideal pH levels of 5.

To address the problematic soil, Steve started digging and found rocks and limestone ridges deep in the soil of the areas of sluggish growth. These areas were high in calcium, which impacts the soil's cation exchange capacity. This fascinating soil characteristic acts to provide a buffer to prevent soil acidification. The best solution for this soil dilemma- don't plant blueberries (or other acid-loving plants) in these areas!

A jewel in the crown of Rockbridge County, Blueberry Hill at Stillhouse continues to be curated by the Donald family and is a delightful spot! Next season, plan to bring your family and friends and pick your fill. Blueberries freeze beautifully and can be stored and enjoyed for up to ten months!

Thank you, Donald Family, for sharing your hard work, talents, commitment, knowledge, and land with all who show up ready to pick blueberries galore and leave with full buckets and happy hearts.

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Saturday, October 5, 11:30 – 4:00 Fredericksburg Native Plant Festival in Fredericksburg, VA University of Mary Washington, Dodd Auditorium, George Washington Hall Price: \$25.00

BuyTickets: <https://treefredericksburg.org/event/fredericksburg-native-plant-festival/>

Tuesday, October 1, 11:30 - 1:30, Beneficial Bugs Talk, JMU Edith Carrier Arboretum, 780 University Blvd., Harrisonburg, VA. Before you squish that bug, join us to find out how different insects are helpful to our gardens and flower beds. You will learn from the Virginia Master Gardeners why it is important to encourage insects to visit your garden and how to attract them by knowing what they eat, where they sleep, and how to identify them in their various life stages. Following this free talk is a demonstration on

building insect houses. For \$15 you can get a kit to construct your own insect house! Click on the [link](#) to register.

Saturday, October 12, 11:00am – 2:00pm, JMU Edith Carrier Arboretum, 780 University Blvd., Harrisonburg, VA. Annual Fall Fest. Check out their website at the link below <https://www.jmu.edu/arboretum/index.shtml>

Tuesday, October 22, 1:00pm – 3:00pm, “Invasive Plant Online Workshop: Identification of Native Plants” with Blue Ridge Prism. \$10 fee. [Registration](#).

Wednesday, October 23, 1:00pm – 3:00pm, “Invasive Plant Online Workshop: Management and Control of Invasive Plants” with Blue Ridge Prism. \$10 fee. [Registration](#).

Friday, October 25, 1:00pm – 3:00pm, Fall Invasive Plant Workshop in Charlottesville’s McIntire Park with Blue Ridge Prism including an invasive plant ID walk and in-person instruction. Space limited to 25 participants. \$25 fee. [Registration](#)

Field Trip Suggestions:

COWBANE PRAIRIE NATURE PRESERVE

Cowbane is a 157-acre Preserve on the western slope of the Blue Ridge, near Stuarts Draft. This protected Preserve is an exceptional example of wet prairie and calcareous spring marsh communities that were once widely common in the Shenandoah Valley but have been greatly reduced by agriculture and industry. On the western slope of the Blue Ridge in the Shenandoah Valley, Cowbane Prairie NAP protects outstanding examples of wet prairies, mesic prairies, and calcareous spring marshes which were once common natural communities in the Shenandoah Valley. These communities have been reduced over the years by agricultural and industrial development. Eleven rare plants including queen-of-the-prairie (*Filipendula rubra*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*), and marsh-speedwell (*Veronica scutellata*) are found at the preserve. Additionally, a reach of the South River within Cowbane Prairie NAP also provides habitat for two watch listed freshwater mussel species.

VISITATION: Part or all the preserve may be periodically closed for resource protection or prescribed burning activities. Please call before visiting.

CONTACT:

Tyler Urgo, Shenandoah Valley Region Steward
Department of Conservation Camp; Recreation
Division of Natural Heritage
540-487-9939

MAPLE FLAT PONDS

This site, near Stuarts Draft, is a phenomenal example of a “sinkhole” pond; a pond formed over 15,000 years ago. Come learn why it is called a sinkhole, how it was formed and its very rare plants.

The Maple Flat ponds comprise a special sinkhole pond ecology in the Big Levels area of the George Washington/Jefferson National Forest near Stuarts Draft, VA. Home to a variety of frogs and salamanders

as well as rare and endangered plants and animals, these Shenandoah Valley sinkhole ponds are shallow depressions in the ground that contain standing water for all or, usually, part of the year. These ponds are unique to the western base of the Blue Ridge and formed when limestone dissolved locally beneath a mantle of colluvial soils which washed off the mountains. A layer of clay then formed several feet below the surface of this area and created a perched surface water table that reaches up into the sinkholes during the wet season. Most popular among birders during spring or fall migration, these ponds can hold Wood Duck, Wild Turkey, Barred Owl, kinglets, Hermit Thrush, Pine Warbler, Bay-breasted Warbler, Northern Parula, Louisiana and Northern Waterthrush, and Canada Warbler. The ponds are accessed on foot from Forest Road 42 (Coal Road). Park in a semi-circular parking area marked with big boulders. If that's full, go ¼ mile further to the next parking pullout.

REDDISH KNOB

Description: Near the West Virginia – Virginia border Elevation: 4101 ft. Reddish Knob is a favorite location to watch fall hawk migration. A visit around the third week of September could reward visitors with sharp-shinned, Cooper's, broad-winged, red-shouldered and red-tailed hawks in seemingly unbelievable numbers. Other migrating raptors that may appear include bald eagle, peregrine falcon and American kestrel. Later in the season, golden eagle and northern goshawk are also possibilities. In addition to raptor viewing the summit also offers a scenic mountain vista to enjoy.

The drive into Reddish Knob is worth taking slowly with the windows rolled down to listen for ruffed grouse, wild turkey, and other animals who might run onto the road, as well as warblers, vireos, and flycatchers above. The woodland that leads to Reddish Knob supports exciting birds that only breed at this high altitude—red crossbills, veery, and black-throated blue, Canada, and mourning warblers have all been found. Use the pullouts along the way to check for these birds as well as the wildflowers and butterflies, such as eastern tiger and spicebush swallowtails and great spangled fritillary. Briery Branch Gap, at the intersections of Reddish Knob Road, Reddish Knob Forest Service Road, Briery Branch Road, and Flagpole Road, is a good place to park and walk around or begin a hike to Flagpole Knob.

Notes: Use extreme caution on these roads, most are unpaved, winding, narrow, deeply rutted, and very steep with precipitous drop-offs, during winter months or after rain, they may be impassable.

Directions: Location: Reddish Knob Spur, Dayton, North River, VA

Coordinates: 38.462306, -79.241679

From Bridgewater, head northwest on SR-727/Spring Creek Road, turn right onto SR-613/Spring Creek Road, turn left onto VA-257 W/Briery Branch Road, turn right to stay on VA-257 W/Briery Branch Road, continue onto SR-924/Briery Branch Road, turn left onto Reddish Knob Forest Service Road, turn left toward Reddish Knob Spur, turn right onto Reddish Knob Spur and follow it to the top.



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