

The Need to Know

Knowing is not just for spies and the village gossip; we all want to know why the sky is blue and why some soap floats and some does not. Learning is an essential part of life and a casual perusal of the activities offered to residents of Mathews and Gloucester shows opportunities to learn something new about knitting and art, trees and ocean currents, oysters and composting. We are forever curious!

Both Mathews and Gloucester Master Gardeners have offered well-attended winter programs of interest to gardeners. Strong emphasis has been placed on the importance of the use of native species, as recently exemplified by the delightful program at the Gloucester Library given by Jan Newton of Williamsburg, Education Chair for Virginia Native Plant Society.

Ms Newton's showing of the year around beauty of the Habitat Garden at Stonehouse Elementary School on Rochambeau Drive in Williamsburg surely prompted parents, PTA and Scout people, and gardeners to decide that all children, everywhere, need to learn about the natural world. Indeed, adults, too, need to learn about the difference between a garden and a habitat. We love our own patch of lawn, shrubs, and bright flowers that surely is a garden but it may not be a habitat, if it is sterile, providing neither food nor shelter for any species but our own.

We love birds and butterflies without realizing that they will become extinct without food. Nesting birds feed insects to those wide mouths before it is a butterfly, that creature is a caterpillar munching on very specific native plants. We wouldn't patronize a grocery that sold only canned goods, yet we often limit our gardens to lawn and alien species of shrubs.

One reason the diversity of native plants is essential is that they provide a variety of insect life, inviting the natural enemies that keep the good bug/bad bug ratio in balance. Nature left wild has astonishing variety and when we over simplify, we create those problems that lead to expensive and detrimental pesticide and herbicide solutions.

When selecting flowers for the perennial beds we often wonder if the native species that have been 'upscaled', bred for different colors or flower form, will serve the same purpose as the original native form. *Coreopsis lanceolata* is one that comes to mind as each year a new version appears. Perhaps if it remains yellow and retains the same fragrance and produces seeds, the birds, bees, and bugs will accept it.

There is a natural and occasionally exclusive fit between flower form and the shape and size of its pollinators so you'd not expect a totally different form of flower to be recognized by its specific pollinator, would you?

From trees to ground covers, the natives abound. To find lists consult www.claytonvnps.org or <http://www.vnps.org>

Good news

Every garden has at least one specimen of our favorite state flower, *Cornus florida*, the beloved dogwood. In the past decades Virginia has lost many of these perfect understory trees to an exotic fungus, dogwood anthracnose. Finally there is hope that the infection has run its course and there are survivors. Meantime we have made do with *Cornus Kousa* which is immune to the fungus but blooms later with smaller, less spectacular flowers.

Discovered in Maryland and tested by the Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station, ‘Appalachian Spring’ is “strikingly resistant” to dogwood anthracnose. A further bonus is that the flower petals (actually they are not petals but bracts) are really large and do not overlap. A further blessing: the leaves turn a bright red in fall. Another selection from Tennessee is ‘Appalachian Joy’ unusual in that there are extra bracts giving the flower the appearance of being double. A feature of this cultivar that would appeal to gardeners in our muggy-summer area is the resistance to mildew of the glossy green foliage.

The Fairweather Gardens catalog features dogwoods, including “a remarkable little-known tree native to eastern North America”, *Cornus alternifolia* Pagoda with tiered drifts of cream-white flowers. It has a preference for moist soil and afternoon shade. After our experience of large trees toppling, we welcome replanting with dogwoods that are both beautiful and disease free.