

Trumpet Vine

Summer 2025



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Trumpet Vine

Knowledge for the Community from
Loudoun County Extension Master Gardeners

Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener Lecture Series

- Free and open to the public
- 7:00 p.m.
- Hosted by Loudoun County Public Library
- Planned by Loudoun County Master Gardeners

Upcoming Virtual Lectures

- **July 3: Rain Gardens** by Sandy Smallwood, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener
- **Aug. 7: Sustainable Landscapes in a Changing Climate: Adapting Practices for Resilience** by Dr. Angelica (Angie) Patterson, Curator of Education and Outreach, Miller Worley Center for the Environment
- **Sept. 4: TBD**

Check the event calendar on our [website](#) for virtual lecture links and updates on topics and speakers.

Also, visit us on Facebook: [VCE Loudoun Master Gardeners](#).

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Message From the Editor

What's Coming This Summer?

Carol Ivory, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

This time last year we had already had an ominous spring colored by drought and higher than normal temperatures. This spring was different. It's been wet enough and the temperatures have been mild. Despite lots of threats of rain, the actual rain YTD for Leesburg has been 16.69 inches compared to the normal of 17.5. We always have to check the numbers due to the gap between perceived rain and actual rain. So far so good. However, the long-term summer forecast is more of what we got last summer—heat and drought. So let's take a deep breath and review what we know about gardening in heat and drought.

First, take care of yourself.

- Carry water with you and stay hydrated.
- Wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing—preferably cotton or linen.
- Protect your skin with sunscreen and a wide brim hat. Netting can protect you from biting gnats.
- Take frequent breaks.
- Try to complete your gardening in the morning before it gets too hot.
- Know the [symptoms of heat exhaustion and heat stroke](#).

Change your watering practices:

- **Check soil moisture at least daily.** If soil is dry at a finger's depth, it's time to water.
- **Water in the morning.** There's less evaporation, and it allows the plants to fully hydrate before the heat of the day sets in.
- **Apply water efficiently.** Use spot watering at the base of the plant, soaker hoses, or drip irrigation systems. Avoid sprinklers.
- **Plants in containers and hanging baskets may need water twice a day.** Especially when windy and hot, containers dry out very quickly.
- **Pay close attention to recently planted plants including trees and shrubs.**
- **Remember to always check soil moisture before watering.** The metabolic processes of plants slow down in extremely hot temperatures. While plant processes like respiration and transpiration increase as temperature goes up, there comes a point where these processes plateau or slow down. This means the plant may use less water at 95°F than at 85°F.

Plus:

- Keep the soil covered with mulch such as ground cover, leaf mold, compost, and wood chips to help insulate the soil and keep it moist.
- Don't fertilize, transplant, or try to propagate.
- Deadhead to preserve precious plant energy.
- Let the lawn go dormant.

Happy gardening and good luck!

Commonly Planted Invasive Plants

Ellen Ruina, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Honeysuckle, Oriental bittersweet, autumn olive—these are among the many uninvited guests covering extensive areas in fields, roadsides, and woods. Often overlooked, however, are invasive plants that are still intentionally planted in cultivated areas around houses, in parks, and around commercial buildings.

Presumably property owners do not intentionally install landscapes with plants that will harm the natural environment, including native wildlife. Most plants introduced from other regions and countries behave well and cause no harm. Some non-native plants, however, spread uncontrollably, suppressing the growth of desirable native plants and damaging the environment in myriad ways. Unfortunately, many nurseries still sell plants that are classified as invasive in Virginia, and some of these species are still widely planted by commercial and housing developers. Property owners are encouraged to familiarize themselves with the Virginia Invasive Plant Species List to avoid spreading undesirable species (<https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/invspdflist>).

If possible, remove invasive plants and replace them with natives. The growing interest in gardening with native plants is encouraging nurseries to increase the number and variety of attractive natives available. Some of the most common invasive plants seen in cultivated areas are shown below with suggestions for native replacements. The Invasive Plant Species list ranks the threat of each species as high, medium, or low. These rankings may help to prioritize which plants to designate for removal. Suggested native plants are all native to Loudoun County unless noted (Source: *Flora of Virginia*).

CALLERY PEAR, including Bradford and other cultivars (*Pyrus calleryana*)

Invasive rank: High

This pear species was introduced as a desirable cultivar because it was (supposedly) sterile and not able to self-pollinate. It's been widely planted by developers and homeowners for many years. With time, however, it was evident that this tree cross-pollinates with other pears. The result is a plant that germinates and spreads easily, often dominating disturbed areas and eliminating native plants.

Native alternatives:

Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*)

Serviceberry (*Amelanchier*)

River birch (*Betula nigra*)

NORWAY MAPLE (*Acer platanoides*)

Invasive rank: Medium

Introduced in the 18th century, this native to Europe and western Asia provides dense shade, grows quickly, and tolerates urban pollution. Despite its desirable qualities, this tree escapes readily. The deep shade, extensive wide and shallow root system, rapid spread, and impact on soils are among the traits that place it on the invasive species list.



Norway Maple
Photo credit: [Hillier Nurseries](#)

Native alternatives:

Black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*)

Swamp white oak (*Quercus bicolor*)

Note: American linden (*Tilia americana*) and sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*) are not recommended now due to stress on these species created by climate change. Red maple (*Acer rubrum*), a lovely tree, is not included because it has been extensively planted and is now overrepresented.

NANDINA (*Nandina domestica*)

Invasive Rank: Low

Called heavenly bamboo, although it is neither heavenly nor a bamboo, nandina is a recent addition to the Virginia invasives list. Although this shrub is ranked low as an environmental threat, it is so ubiquitous in neighborhood landscapes that it deserves more (negative) attention. Undesirable properties of this plant include: its berries are poisonous to some birds, it is toxic to pets, and it is not attractive to most pollinators.

Native alternatives:

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillate*)

Virginia sweetspire (*Itea virginica*)

Note: This plant is not established as native to Loudoun County but is present in adjacent counties.

BARBERRY (*Berberis thunbergii*)

Invasive rank: Medium

Although planted extensively in front yards and in other cultivated areas, barberry is aggressively invasive. In addition, barberry creates a hospitable location for ticks.

Native alternatives:

Red chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia*)

Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)

Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*)—see Note above.



Japanese Barberry
Photo credit: [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

CHINESE PRIVET (*Ligustrum sinense*)

Invasive rank: High

Privet is one of the shrubs planted frequently in cultivated areas and often seen invading forests and other disturbed areas. Because it is common and highly invasive, removal is recommended.

Native alternatives:

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*)

Arrowwood viburnum (*Viburnum dentatum*)

JAPANESE SPIREA (*Spiraea japonica*)

Invasive rank: Medium

This shrub is spread through seeds carried by birds and water as well as root suckers.

Native alternatives:

Meadowsweet (*Spiraea alba*)

Shrubby St John's wort (*Hypericum prolificum*)

BURNING BUSH (*Euonymus alatus*)

Invasive rank: High

Burning bush tolerates both sun and shade and is spread widely by birds. The vibrant red foliage is easily spotted in the fall.

Native alternatives:

Fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*)

Blueberries (*Vaccinium spp.*)

ENGLISH IVY

Invasive rank: Medium

Native to Europe and western Asia, this common vine/groundcover forms dense mats that block sunlight and can damage trees as well as buildings. English ivy is challenging to control, and ivy leaves are likely to pop up years after removal.

Native alternatives:

Green and gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*)

Coral bells/alumroot: (*Heuchera americana*)

CHINESE SILVERGRASS (*Miscanthus sinensis*)

Invasive rank: Medium

Unfortunately, this widely used ornamental grass can grow in a wide range of conditions.

Native alternatives:

Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

Pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*)

Note: This plant is not established as native to Loudoun County but is present in adjacent counties.



Chinese Silvergrass
Photo: [Plant Delights Nursery](#)

The list of plants included above is not comprehensive but represents some of the most commonly found intruders in cultivated areas. Replacing invasive plants with Virginia natives is never a one-to-one exchange. Every plant species has its own habits and characteristics. It's important to consider soil, moisture and light conditions, mature height and spread, and your own objectives—are you looking for conspicuous flowers, a screen, fall foliage? There are many resources to help you choose the right plant for the right place. A good place to start is the Virginia Native Plant Society (www.vnps.org).

From Bagworms to Butterflies: My Garden's Glow-Up

Allisyn Jones, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener Intern

Buying my first home felt like a rite of passage. When I finally held the keys to my townhouse, I couldn't wait to make it my own—especially the forlorn patch of green out front. Calling it a “garden” would've been generous. It featured a towering arborvitae riddled with bagworms, a few builder-grade shrubs, some hostas and oriental lilies, and a very sad, diseased azalea. I never imagined I'd transform that space into the pollinator paradise it is today.



How the yard started in 2014
All photos courtesy of Allisyn Jones

This is the story of how I turned a neglected yard into a nearly year-round buffet for bees, butterflies, and birds—with a few gardening missteps (and laughs) along the way.

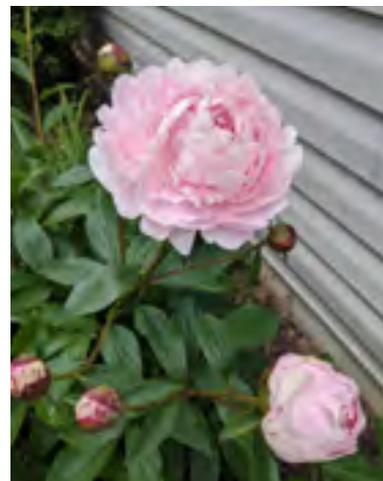
The arborvitae swayed like an unsteady baby just learning to walk. Bagworms treated it like an all-you-can-eat buffet, and birds gave it the cold shoulder. It hogged prime root real estate, so I had it removed and the stump ground down. Once the soil settled, I planted a few budget-friendly finds from the box store—mostly the under-a-dollar misfits. I leaned on the plants I remembered from gardening with my mom, hoping nostalgia would bloom into something beautiful.

The backyard offered a blank canvas. It was mostly sunny with a few soggy spots—classic Virginia clay. But when I dug in and found worms—nature's soil aerators—I knew I had a good start. I discovered Bumper Crop at a local nursery, and it changed everything. That stuff worked wonders on my rock-hard soil.

Inspired by my late aunt's beachside hydrangeas, I planted one in the front yard. Rookie mistake. It baked in the sun like a biscuit on a dashboard. I didn't think to move it, and it never stood a chance. Lesson learned: right plant, right place.

In 2016, I covered a hidden back corner with periwinkle, encouraged by a nursery's promise of “easy ground cover with charming blue blooms.” Well, it took off like [kudzu](#) on caffeine because it's an [invasive plant](#) (unbeknownst to me at the time). I'm still pulling it out every week.

Life threw me a curveball, and I rented out the house for two years. I didn't expect the tenants to garden, but wow—they really didn't. Grass choked out most of my perennials. But when I returned, my peonies had survived. Their blooms felt like a welcome-home hug.



Peonies that brought me joy when my front looked like a disaster after the renters



Front yard after the renters



Swamp rose-mallow

By then, my daughter had discovered the joy of digging in the dirt. Around the same time, I found the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, and my mission became clear: turn our yard into a pollinator sanctuary.

In spring 2022, we planted our first swamp milkweed. That led to our first trip to a native plant nursery. I started small—yarrow, aster, swamp rose hibiscus mingled with my hollyhocks. For the shady spots, I went full Jurassic with ostrich and dixie wood ferns. As the swamp milkweed became established, so did our insect visitors. We even spotted American goldfinches, drawn in by the wildflowers we planted from seed.

The more we added to our garden, the more volunteers showed up. From nasturtium to another type of peony, I suspect the squirrels helped “plant” a few things. I usually curse them, but maybe they saw our yard as a good place to stash treasures.

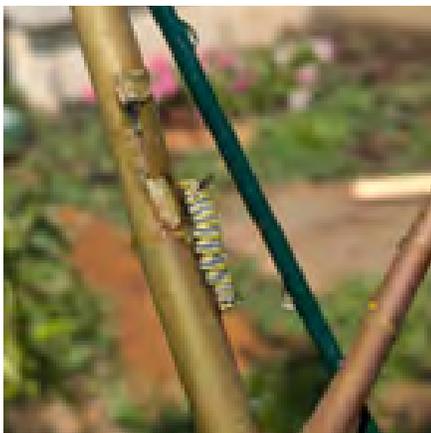
In 2023, we had our first caterpillars, and my daughter was over the moon. It was like a living science experiment. We counted 15 on just three milkweed plants. Ladybugs feasted on aphids, assassin bugs patrolled the leaves (though we were a bit heartbroken to see one take down a caterpillar), and hummingbirds zipped through the yard. I had to start using an AI lens just to identify all the bees, wasps, and butterflies we were seeing. I’d heard the phrase “plant it and they will come,” but I never imagined we’d create such a thriving ecosystem.



Welcomed pollinators in the hollyhocks

Eventually, I had to say goodbye to the hollyhocks after a stubborn burst of rust. They took up a lot of space, so I replaced them with Loudoun County natives: goldenrod, foxglove beardtongue, purple coneflower, sweet joe pye weed, and scarlet bee balm. In the backyard, the ferns thrived, and I added foamflower and turtlehead. In the sunny spots, coneflowers and blazing stars now bloom alongside calla lilies and dianthus.

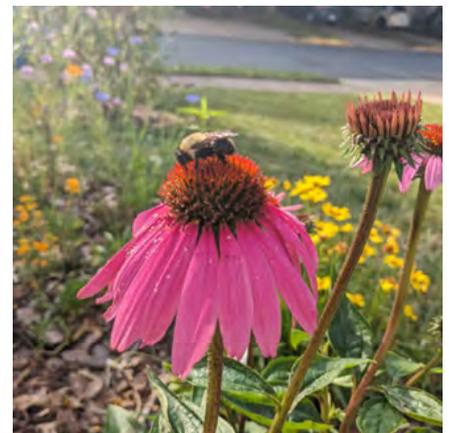
And that sad little azalea from day one? I moved her to a sunnier spot, and she bloomed like she got a second lease on life.



Monarch caterpillar



Finally a monarch



Happy coneflowers = happy bees

Now, our garden buzzes with life. It's not perfect—there's always weeding, learning, and the occasional plant rebellion—but it's ours. And every bloom, bee, and butterfly reminds me that even the saddest yard can become a sanctuary—with a little compost, a lot of love, and maybe a few gardening gloves that mysteriously disappear.

Thinking About Helping Pollinators? Start With Local Plants.

If you're thinking about helping pollinators, the best thing you can do is plant native species. Native plants provide the nectar, pollen, and habitat that local pollinators evolved to depend on. Over 80 percent of flowering plants rely on pollinators to reproduce—and many of those pollinators are in decline due to habitat loss, pesticides, and climate change.

Even a few native plants in a container garden or small yard can make a difference. Start with just one or two species like milkweed, coneflower, or goldenrod, and you'll be amazed at who shows up. Trust me—plant it, and they really will come.

- [Creating Inviting Habitats](#)
- [Virginia Invasive Plant List](#)
- [Plant Virginia Natives](#)
- [Pollinators in the Out-of-Play Areas of Virginia Golf Courses](#)

Gardening on a Slope: The Last Project

Gaye Mara, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Our March issue carried an article about the gardening projects on my steeply sloped property, including one project that was in the first stages of planning. That project, on the slope in front of the house, is now installed. Unlike the previous projects, there is no hardscaping but only plants.

The project involved:

1. Thoroughly weeding the slope, leaving only bare soil.
2. Installing drainpipes to divert the flow from two downspouts at the top of the slope to one side so that a heavy downpour won't wash away our new garden. (The drainpipes will be replaced by rain barrels hooked up to driplines for watering the garden.)
3. Selecting the plants and laying out a planting plan.
4. Installing and mulching the plants.
5. Installing deer netting—to remain in place for up to two years until the plants grow up and fill in enough to survive being browsed.



Native plants installed on the slope in front of our house. Photo courtesy of Gaye Mara

Below is a list of the plants we put in. They're all native, a mix of shrubs, grasses, and perennials. Our garden designer had to work hard to fill the order; native plants have become immensely popular, and growers aren't keeping up with the demand. The orange flags in the photo are marking tiny seedlings that were the

only plants available of some species. One plant we wanted but couldn't get at all is threadleaf coreopsis, *Coreopsis verticillata*. It's a beauty, and we hope to add some later.

The first four plants on the list are grasses, the last three are shrubs, and the fifteen in between are perennials. The shrubs, the grasses, and most of the perennials will grow deep, tough root systems that will hold the slope. You can see the Gro-Low Sumacs, *Rhus aromatica*, clearly in the photo; they're the three larger shrubs spaced across the slope about halfway down. As the name suggests, they stay low; but they spread as much as eight feet across and function almost like a groundcover.

One thing to note about planting perennials is that they don't look like much for the first few years. Initially they put their energy into laying down a good root system. Many will not bloom the first year. But once it's mature, this will be a very full garden with four-season interest and support for pollinators, blooms throughout the growing season, colorful fall foliage, and stems of tall grasses standing through the winter.

Description	Qty
Broom sedge, <i>Andropogon virginicus</i> Q	9
Big bluestem, <i>Andropogon gerardii</i> #1	8
Little bluestem, <i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i> Q	25
Indian grass, <i>Sorghastrum nutans</i> Q	9
False blue indigo, <i>Baptisia australis</i> Q	15
Common milkweed, <i>Asclepias syriaca</i> Q	3
Boneset, <i>Eupatorium sessilifolium</i> Q	3
Lanceleaf coreopsis, <i>Coreopsis lanceolata</i> Q	11
Woodland sunflower, <i>Helianthus divaricata</i> #1	5
Blazing star, <i>Liatris spicata</i> Q	3
Bee balm, <i>Monarda fistulosa</i> Q	9
Slender mountain mint, <i>Pycnanthemum tenuifolium</i> Q	12
Black eyed susan, <i>Rudbeckia fulgida</i> , Q	5
Tall goldenrod, <i>Solidago altissima</i> Q	7
Early goldenrod, <i>Solidago juncea</i> Q	25
Calico aster, <i>Symphotrichum lateriflorum</i> Q	9
Gray goldenrod, <i>Solidago nemoralis</i> Q	21
Aromatic aster, <i>Symphotrichum oblongifolium</i> Q	11
Common Blue violet, <i>Viola sororia</i> Q	8
"Gro-Low" Sumac, <i>Rhus aromatica</i> var. "gro-low" #3	1
Shrubby St-John's Wort, <i>Hypericum prolificum</i> #1	3
New Jersey Tea, <i>Ceanothus americanus</i> #1	7

Native plants installed in the garden. Credit: District Native Plants

Cues to Care Can Help Others Understand Your Intentions

Barbara DeRosa-Joynt, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

I don't generally consider myself a messy person, but my garden would likely be found in the dictionary under antonyms for "manicured." When the deer don't graze it down to unrecognizable nubs, my garden is what I like to think of as exuberant, though my husband has been known to refer to it as "the jungle." Enter "cues to care."

Cues to care is a phrase coined by [Joan Nassauer](#) in 1995. The basic premise is "is this done on purpose and does it look like someone is taking care of the garden?" Cues to care can be practices or objects that help make clear that someone is tending the garden. These are deployed in all kinds of gardens around the world, and many are considered universal garden elements.



Kew gardens
Photo courtesy of Barbara DeRosa-Joynt



Asclepias incarnata
Photo: Barbara DeRosa-Joynt

But back to my garden for a moment. My quarter-acre garden in Eastern Loudoun County is typical in size for this part of the county, but is atypical in that it is composed of 90-something percent native plants, so the plants in my garden are very different from those in nearly all my neighbors' gardens. When people do not recognize the plants in your garden, some seem to automatically assume they must be weeds. Others, perhaps recognizing plants they remember from childhood as growing in a grandmother's garden, sometimes assume they must be weeds. And to be fair, some native plants have common names with "weed" right in them—milkweed (*Asclepias spp.*) is a prime example—so I can understand why some people may be confused. Many straight species of native plants can grow quite large, and some have nondescript flowers,

bucking the trend of plant breeders creating bigger, brighter, and bolder blooms. Combine that with my practice of planting close together, as is common in nature, and I can grudgingly understand my husband's use of the term "jungle" to refer to my garden.

Like many gardeners, I am constantly thinking of ways to improve this or that, but my native-plant-filled garden has more thought, planning, and intention than pretty much any other garden in my neighborhood. As mentioned, I have the plants planted close together, and yes indeed they sometimes tangle together or otherwise look messy compared to my neighbors' yards with highly manicured flowerbeds. The question is, how can we help our neighbors—or our spouses, for that matter—



Side yard
Photo courtesy of Barbara DeRosa-Joynt

that are unfamiliar with these plants or this style of densely planted garden understand that this is intentional and not view it as overgrown or weedy, or the result of just letting nature take over?

When you garden with native plants, deploying these cues can be particularly helpful because the plants themselves may be unfamiliar to people. Using these familiar practices that people inherently recognize can help them more easily understand what you are doing. But really, these practices are great additions to any garden. Examples of cues to care include:

Educational signage: Numerous organizations certify properties as being wildlife, pollinator, or monarch-friendly. All have signage available, often for a fee, that can help explain this special aspect of your garden. There are also lots of signs available online to purchase that can be used to help your neighbors understand your intentions and make clear—whether you have a native plant garden or not—that you are working to help pollinators and other wildlife. Some gardeners create their own signs to educate passersby about the plants in their gardens.



Pollinator signs

Photo: [John Brandauer](#)



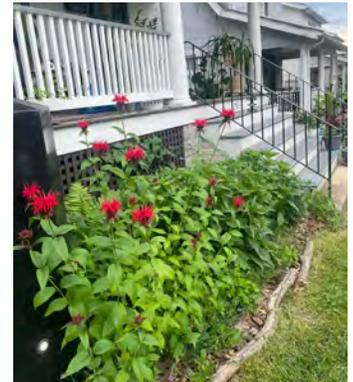
Ninebark and sign
Photo: Neal Sanders*

Edging: A commonly understood gardening technique, edging is readily identifiable; however, in native plant gardens, this simple thing can take on more significance in communicating intention. Since it can sometimes be a line of demarcation between a less-manicured flowerbed and a mowed lawn (certainly true in my garden) or walkway, this obvious border can be impactful in communicating your message. In my garden, my husband installed granite pavers, in part as a way to prevent me from expanding my flowerbeds indefinitely. Some gardeners use found objects, like branches or brush from the site, to edge beds in a more organic way.



Front bed

Photo courtesy of Barbara DeRosa-Joynt



Branches for edging

Photo: Trilby Hillenbrand*

Pathways and seating: Pathways in beds, another traditional garden element, can be the classic mowed pathways in a meadow garden, informal mulched paths, stepping



Mulched path

Photo: Brian Magum*



Garden bench

Photo courtesy of [Mark Wordy](#)

stones, or other kinds of walkways that meander through flowerbeds. All these approaches offer excellent ways to allow garden visitors (and the gardener him- or herself) to enter into the beds, and they also indicate that you are doing this on purpose. Adding chairs or a bench to your beds does the same thing and, as a bonus, makes it easy to stop and admire your handiwork and the wildlife that your garden is attracting.

Garden art: Some gardeners use sculptures or other artwork to show that the space is cared for and that the practices are intentional. Garden sculptures can be serious or whimsical, and any scale that makes sense or appeals to your eye can work. A vine on a trellis or obelisk can add height to the garden and show that you are directing the plants where to go.

Habitat structures: Adding a water feature, like a small pond or birdbath, can benefit wildlife and simultaneously signal your intentions using immediately identifiable traditional garden elements. Some people also add birdhouses or shelters for overwintering insects to support wildlife, and these can take many shapes and forms and be quite beautiful as well.

Recognizable plants: I am not a purist. While my garden is composed of nearly all U.S. native plants, I also have non-natives, and though most of my plants are native to Loudoun County, some are instead native elsewhere in Virginia, native to the Eastern United States, or native elsewhere in the United States. Purple coneflower (echinacea purpurea) is a great example. Though not native here in Virginia, many people recognize this classic prairie plant and make the connection to native plants and wildlife, and this is another way of communicating what you are doing in your garden. I view purple coneflower as a gateway plant. It is relatively easy to grow, forgiving, and thrives in our clay soil as long as it has enough sun. It can help build people's confidence to add plants to their garden that are native to Loudoun County and Virginia.

Of course, we all need to maintain our gardens; that is a given. In addition to the above, some other practices that can be helpful in communicating that your garden is being taken care of include keeping paved walkways and driveways swept and preventing plants from encroaching too far over pathways so the pathways look well-maintained. Planting beds densely helps suppress weeds, but removing weeds is another way to show that the garden is receiving attention. There is never enough time for weeding, so I tend to prioritize removing plants that are readily recognizable as weeds (e.g.,



NWF certified habitat
Photo courtesy of [Lake Lou](#)



Garden art
Photo: [Heart's Ease Landscape & Garden Design*](#)



Birdbath
Photo courtesy of [La Fattina](#)



Skipper on echinacea
Photo courtesy of Barbara DeRosa-Joynt

dandelions or clover, though I allow clover to stay in the lawn), and I focus first on weeds that are most visible, generally those closest to the edge of the bed or walkway. When I am pressed for time, I leave alone the less visible weeds deeper in the beds as well as the native plant volunteers that I plan to remove or relocate, and I put them on my to-do list for another day. All of these are good maintenance practices no matter the composition or density of plants in your beds. Happy gardening!



Pollinator sign
Photo courtesy of [Gail Langellotto](#)

**Author's note: I asked for help with photos to illustrate this article via the VA Native Plant Society Facebook page, and a number of people responded and shared photos with me. The photographers whose work is in photos #5, 7, 8, and 11 each voluntarily provided those photos in response to my request with the understanding they would be used in the Loudoun Master Gardener's newsletter for educational purposes and that they would receive a photo credit.*

Native Plants: Take a Closer Look

Carol Ivory, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

As the research and [trails](#) at Mt. Cuba highlight, many native plants have been under cultivation in gardens for decades. Some natives have dozens of cultivars that service pollinators as well as or even better than the straight species. These natives, long garden staples, usually understand “sit, stay.” They are trusty, dependable, and beautiful. But if you are a native plant lover, you venture beyond these and get plants that provide surprises.

I’m a low-maintenance gardener—I believe you plant natives, and they proceed to do what they want. I’m here to minimize the chaos. But sometimes a plant grabs my attention. I’d like to report on observations of two of my native plants. The first one is *Carex grayi*, or Gray’s sedge.



Seedhead resembling a mace
Photo courtesy of Carol Ivory

In addition to my neighborhood where I planted it, I have found it growing in the wild on the Maryland side of the Potomac River at Edwards Ferry and downstream. I’m always so excited when I find native plants growing in the wild!

The outstanding characteristic of Gray’s sedge is its unique seedhead, which looks like a medieval mace. These seedheads stay on the plants from late spring through fall. These are very attractive, especially when mixed with ostrich ferns. Deer avoid it, a real plus.

Morven Park Native Plant Sale. I planted them in a native plant bed created along a winding sidewalk between the back of townhomes and a wooded area to mitigate the erosion and sharp drop-off on the woods side of the sidewalk. A low retaining wall held the bed in place. Ostrich ferns were along the wall, and the two sedges were planted in front of them. The



Sedge growing along runoff
Photo courtesy of Carol Ivory

sedges increased in size, and I divided the clumps a couple times, hoping to increase their numbers that way. Then, as the rain pattern changed and heavy downpours increased, runoff from the sidewalk would inundate the flower bed, and water poured over the wall and down the hill into the woods. I began to notice Gray’s sedge growing along the path of the stormwater runoff and down to the woods with a large cluster just in front of a log that slows the runoff. I finally got curious and did some research.



Gray’s sedge growing with ostrich ferns
Photo courtesy of Carol Ivory

Gray’s sedge is named in honor of Asa Gray, the botanist who founded the vascular plant herbarium at Harvard College. Gray’s sedge is found from

eastern-central Canada (Ontario, Quebec), western New England States, south to Florida, southwest to Oklahoma, and throughout much of the Midwest to Kansas. It is found on forest floodplains, depressions, wet bottoms, marshes, shaded seeps, swales, and riverbanks. It grows in clumps about 24-27 inches high and has short rhizomes (necessitating a different strategy to reproduce and spread). Gray's sedge plays a crucial role in erosion control. Its robust root system stabilizes the soil, preventing loss during heavy rains or flooding. Additionally, this plant acts as a natural water filter. It improves water quality by trapping sediments and absorbing pollutants, helping the surrounding ecosystems. It works well in bioswales and rain gardens. Birds and waterfowl eat the seeds. This sedge provides vital habitat and shelter, offering nesting sites and protection for various pollinators such as bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects. While these plants do not directly supply nectar or pollen, they enhance the overall habitat for pollinators by coexisting with flowering perennials.

Because Gray's sedge grows in such diverse environments as Canada, Florida, and Kansas, I believe there are variations in growth and requirements found online. Sources in Michigan site a maximum height of 4 feet, formation of seedheads by mid-summer, and a preference for full sun. I have seen no Gray's sedge growing in full sun in Northern Virginia. But I have seen it thriving in the woods with dappled sun. Mine have had seedheads for the past month. Slightly over 24 inches seems to be the norm for this area.

These sedges spread because their seeds float in water. The perigynia, a sac surrounding the seeds of Gray's sedge is inflated. This allows the perigynium to function like "water wings," enabling the structure to float and disperse the seed by water.

I had not focused on this sedge until this spring, and my observations and a little research have convinced me that Gray's sedge should be used more in naturalized areas where there is erosion, flooding, and a need to hold the soil. I'm seeing this plant in a new light.



Volunteer seedlings appearing in the garden
Photo courtesy of Carol Ivory



Dried perigynium, each containing a seed
Photo: [Prairie Moon Nursery](#)

My second plant is the hairy wild petunia, *Ruellia humilis*. It is not well-known or used much in conventional nurseries or gardens, but it started to be promoted in native plant circles a few years ago. I knew it needed sun, so I made a nice little spot for it in a garden I care for and purchased three plants from a local native grower. One pot contained not *Ruellia* but a hitchhiker, self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, a creeper and known medicinal plant. It's still there, creeping. I transplanted a clump of it to another location that needs a tough ground cover to grow under Joe-Pye weed and ironweed. We'll see how that goes. But the other two plants were wild petunia, and the following year I found seedlings coming up over half the bed. This year, they are coming up all over the entire bed, including in the shade. Is this a takeover? How did they spread so far so fast? Time for some research.

This plant is difficult to research because it's not in the general trade, and

there's not a lot of information available, plus there are four or five plants commonly called wild petunia that often get lumped together. There is also a Mexican wild petunia that is invasive. To try to differentiate, I am specifically calling this one the hairy wild petunia, *Ruellia humilis*, because the foliage is covered with fine hairs.



Wild petunia flower
Photo courtesy of Carol Ivory

This plant's natural range starts from Pennsylvania down to Florida (but not in South Carolina), then it extends west to Texas and north to Nebraska and Minnesota and all states between. Its typical habitat is dry prairie, fields, meadows, and open woodlands, often in sandy soil. It is usually abundant in these locations. The US Forest Service warns that it "may become extremely weedy in a garden."

Ruellia humilis is not related in any way to the common garden petunia, which is in the *Solanaceae* or nightshade family (a relative of tomatoes!). The hairy wild petunia is in the *Acanthaceae* family. It's a long-lived perennial that produces a profusion of pale blue/violet flowers that last for just one day. They attract a number of pollinators, including bees, beetles, butterflies, flies, hummingbirds, moths, and wasps. Wild petunia acts as a host for butterfly larvae, specifically the common buckeye.

How do these hairy wild petunias spread so far so fast? The seed pods are dehiscent. That is, they split open with great force and can throw seed as far as 10 feet. Each seed capsule is smooth, 2-sectioned, and bullet-shaped. Each section contains 3 to 8 flattened oval seeds that are ejected when ripe. It appears that the germination rate is high.

I think I know enough now, between its performance in my garden and the weedy warning from the US Forest Service, that I'm going to transplant as many wild petunia plants as possible to a strip in the middle of the parking lot that we have planted with hearty natives, many of which are tall. The hairy wild petunia will make a nice "skirt" around the little blue stem, late boneset, etc., and act like a great green mulch. Right plant, right place.



Immature seed capsule
Photo: Missouriplants.com

Vultures: Nature's Clean Up Crew

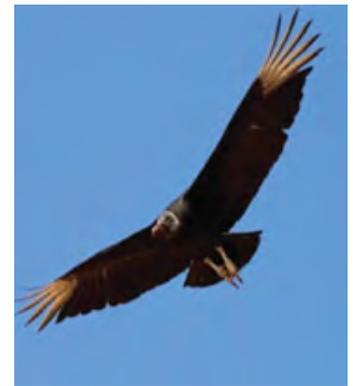
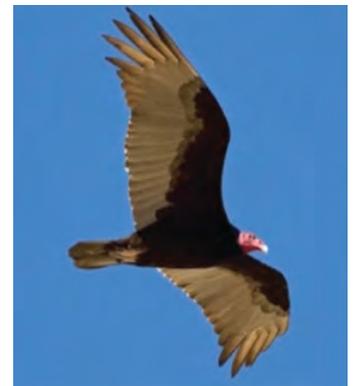
Heather Keith, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener

Vultures are the cleaning crew of nature. They clean carcasses and prevent stench and the spread of diseases associated with carrion. Their activities accelerate the breakdown process, returning vital nutrients to the ecosystem more efficiently than does natural decomposition alone. They help prevent the spread of disease by eating dead animals before bacteria and viruses such as anthrax, cholera, botulism, rabies, or salmonella can multiply. Nature's unsung heroes live on every continent of the world except Antarctica and have a place in culture, lore, and religion throughout the world.

Virginia hosts two varieties: the Black Vulture and the Turkey Vulture, which is the most commonly found variety. The California Condor is the third variety found in the United States. Vultures in the Americas are called New World Vultures, and the 19 varieties in Europe, Africa, and Asia are called Old World Vultures.

Turkey Vultures

Turkey Vultures have the largest olfactory system of all birds. With their larger nostrils, they rely on a keen sense of smell to find meals up to a mile away and 12 to 24 hours old. They are lanky birds that make wobbly circles in a teetering flight and fly at lower altitude with wings in a V-shape. They have a 5- to 6-foot wingspan. They often roost in large groups but venture out independently to forage for food; they are territorial feeders. In the wild they can live to be 16 years old.



Turkey Vultures (top) and Black Vultures (bottom)
Photos courtesy of the [Cornell School of Ornithology](#)

Black Vultures

Due to their poor sense of smell, Black Vultures will actually shadow Turkey Vultures and follow them to food sources. Black Vultures are compact birds with broad wings and short tails. They have strong wingbeats followed by short glides, and they soar high in the sky on thermals. They have a 4.4- to 5.5-foot wingspan. These are highly social birds that can outcompete Turkey Vultures in larger flocks for food sources and will even share food with relatives. In the wild, Black Vultures can live to be 25 years old.

Interesting Facts About Turkey Vultures and Black Vultures

New World Vultures lack a syrinx, or vocal organ; they simply grunt and hiss when they jostle at a carcass or feel threatened. Virginia Vultures do not build nests but rather lay their eggs in dark recesses in ledges,

caves, crevices, and hollow logs, as well as on the ground, in mammal burrows, and in abandoned buildings.



Black Vultures displaying affection
Photo: [Fitri Astuty, Animals Planet Facebook Public Group](#)

Turkey Vultures are definitely monogamous, and Black Vultures appear to be as well. After a successful courtship dance, Turkey Vultures settle down as a pair for life, sharing egg incubation and feeding of up to three young at a time. Once they hatch, the young are fed from regurgitation even months after they have fledged. The juveniles are able to fly 75 to 80 days after hatching. Pairs remain together year-round. Family members associate more closely with each other than with other individuals.

Most vulture species, but especially the Turkey Vulture, have weak flat feet with long toes and blunted talons, poorly suited for gripping or carrying objects. Therefore, Turkey Vultures are physically incapable of picking up animals the way eagles and hawks do. Neither a Turkey Vulture nor a Black Vulture will snatch your dog or cat.

While we may get the impression from driving our local highways that vultures' primary diet is deer carrion, they are not picky eaters and will eat any dead animal they can find as long as the carcass is not too old. Vultures feed opportunistically on a wide range of wild and domestic carrion, including mice, shrews, deer, pigs, sheep, chickens, blackbirds, snakes, turtles, snails, grasshoppers, groundhogs, and coyotes. They also eat cow manure and rotten pumpkins. They can go for days without eating. When a vulture finally finds food, it sometimes eats so much that it must wait several hours before flying. Vultures can eat 20 percent of their body weight in one sitting. A group of vultures can strip a dead animal down to a skeleton in less than an hour. The efficiency of the vulture ensures that food isn't left to attract larger predators or pests who may carry rabies.

Vultures spend a lot of time sticking their heads deep into carcasses. This is believed to be the reason why they don't have true feathers on their heads. A vulture's highly acidic digestive system virtually sterilizes everything it ingests. Consequently, their feces are sterile as well.

Vultures have some habits that do not endear them to humans. In the early morning, vultures often will sit with their wings spread wide, increasing the surface area of their bodies so that the sun can more easily warm them. This is called the "horaltic pose." This posture also helps control ectoparasites like feather lice and flat flies. This stance taken by a group of vultures can look pretty scary to people who don't understand the purpose of it. Then, to cool off, vultures urinate on their legs and feet; this also kills bacteria or parasites and helps to keep the birds healthy. If a Turkey Vulture is disturbed or harassed, it will throw up on the animal that is bothering it. It can projectile vomit up to 10 feet. Even baby vultures will vomit. Don't harass a vulture.



Turkey Vulture strikes horaltic pose
Photo: [Alan Murphy, Hawks Aloft Facebook Page](#)

People who care for vultures in zoos and preserves are unanimous in their assessment that vultures are very

intelligent and trainable. They can recognize people's faces, are affectionate toward the caregivers that they like, and can be very playful.

Vultures throughout the ages have been associated with magical powers, perhaps because of their natural behavior of dealing with death daily without coming to harm. Vultures were an important part of the folklore and beliefs of ancient cultures. The ancient Egyptians worshipped vultures as gods. Ancient Incas believed vultures were messengers of the gods. In India, it was believed vultures guarded the gates to the underworld. Vulture lore has carried over into modern culture. It's very interesting; just rely on the facts.

Many species of vultures face threats like poisoning, habitat loss, and collisions with infrastructure. Poisoning occurs when vultures eat animals that have died of poisoning or animals that have been treated with a drug that is poisonous to the vultures. They can also die of lead poisoning when they eat pellets or bullets that killed the animal.

Recently there have been massive losses of vultures in [South Africa due to poisoned wildlife carcasses](#) intentionally set out for vultures. Vultures are killed for their body parts in the illegal wildlife trade. Over 30 years ago, the vultures in India began to die off. By the mid-1990s, the 50-million-strong vulture population had plummeted to near zero because of diclofenac, a cheap nonsteroidal painkiller for cattle that is fatal to vultures. Birds that fed on carcasses of livestock treated with the drug suffered kidney failure and died. The unintentional decimation of these scavenging birds allowed deadly bacteria and infections to proliferate, leading to the deaths of about half a million people over five years. Then, without vultures, the stray dog population increased, bringing rabies to humans. The total cost of [this large negative shock to sanitation is quantified at \\$69.4 billion per year](#). Vultures are still endangered in India, but some species are rebounding.

The conservation of this essential bird is a global priority. Several organizations are dedicated to vulture conservation (primarily Old World Vultures), working to protect these essential scavengers from threats like poisoning, habitat loss, and declining food sources. One of the leading groups in the [Foxloft Vulture Conservancy](#) focuses on education, research, and rehabilitation to protect vultures worldwide. They also support conservation projects and raise awareness about the importance of vultures.

There is also a global network of biologists and conservationists called the [IUCN Vulture Specialist Group](#). They work on vulture research, conservation strategies, and advocacy. They collaborate with governments and organizations to implement effective conservation measures. Anti-poisoning campaigns are being carried out by conservationists working to ban harmful pesticides. They also work to educate communities about the dangers of poisoning carcasses, which can wipe out entire vulture colonies. Vultures are also protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty, and it is illegal to kill them in North America.

Several regions have designated vulture conservation areas where the vultures can nest and feed without human interference. GPS transmitters are also being used by scientists to track vulture movement. The transmitters are used to understand vulture behavior and identify threats. There is an organization South Africa called [Vulpro](#) that focuses on rehabilitating injured vultures and breeding them in captivity to boost wild populations.

There is an event called the International Vulture Awareness Day, which was created to increase public awareness and education. This day is designed to spread knowledge about vultures' ecological importance.

Despite efforts by scientists and conservationists, challenges continue to remain for vultures. Hard work is continuing to reverse declines and ensure that vultures thrive for future generations.

Sources

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The Ida Lee Demonstration Garden: A Quiet Place That Makes a Big Difference

Sharon Murphy, Loudoun County Extension Master Gardener Intern

We've all felt it—that little lift in mood when we step outside and take in some greenery. Maybe it's the way the sunlight filters through the leaves, or how a breeze carries the scent of flowers. But it turns out this is more than just a pleasant feeling. Research has shown that even a short visit to a green space is subjectively and quantitatively good for your health.

A good example of the direct and measurable impact of green space on health is cortisol—the hormone our bodies produce when we're stressed. It is the key to our fight-or-flight response, which—when we experience it in excess—may lead to many adverse health outcomes. In studies, people who spent time in gardens or forests had measurably lower cortisol levels after exposure to the natural environment. That means their bodies were literally relaxing. What's interesting is that this effect didn't occur when people were only exposed to pictures or videos of nature via “digital windows.” The real thing makes a difference. You need to smell the plants, hear the birds, feel the ground under your feet to realize the nature-induced reduction in cortisol levels.



Ida Lee Demonstration Garden
All photos courtesy of Sharon Murphy

One of the earliest and most famous studies at the intersection of nature and health was by a researcher named Roger Ulrich in 1984. He found that hospital patients who had a view of trees outside their windows healed faster and needed less pain medication than those who looked out onto a brick wall. That study sparked decades of new research into how nature helps us heal—not just physically, but emotionally and mentally, too.

That's why a place like the Ida Lee Park Demonstration Garden in Leesburg matters so much. Managed by the Loudoun County Master Gardeners (LCMG), it's more than just a pretty spot in which to admire flowers or get tips for your backyard. It's a calm, open space where anyone can slow down, breathe a little easier, and just be.

If you've ever walked the paths there, you know what I mean. The flowers and native plants attract bees, butterflies, and birds. There are benches where you can sit in the shade and just listen to the world go by. Whether you're dealing with the stress of work, grieving a loss, recovering from illness, or just needing a break, this garden gives you a little space to reset.

Not long ago, while I was weeding one of the flower beds, I had a couple of chance conversations that stuck with me. One gentleman was there with his camera, trying to catch bees in action. Another stopped to ask about the Black-eyed Susans I was rescuing from a patch of stubborn Creeping Charlie. Those brief chats reminded me how even a solo gardening task can turn into a small moment of connection. I don't know if those two visitors left feeling any different, but I hope they did. I know I did.



Shade garden

Of course, the Ida Lee Demonstration Garden also plays a big role in educating people—whether it’s about native plants, soil health, or how to grow your own vegetables. That’s a kind of healing too. When people learn how to care for plants, they often end up caring a little more for themselves and for their community. And gardening isn’t just about vegetables or flowers—it’s about purpose, routine, and growth. That’s especially powerful for older adults, veterans, people living with disabilities, or anyone navigating health challenges. It’s what horticultural therapy is all about.

What makes Ida Lee an even more special place is how open and accessible it is. You don’t need a referral. You don’t need a reason. You just show up. Whether you’re an experienced gardener or someone who just wants a quiet place to sit for a while, the garden is there for you.

In the end, the Ida Lee Demonstration Garden isn’t just a place to learn about gardening—it’s a quiet living space that supports the health and well-being of our whole community. In a world that moves fast and often feels overwhelming, having a space like this—free, beautiful, and welcoming—isn’t just a luxury, it’s a real public health asset.

Invasive Plant Site Assessments

Are you concerned about invasive plants on your property?

[VCE Loudoun Master Gardeners](#) are accepting [Invasive Plant Site Assessment requests](#) until **Wednesday, October 15, 2025**.

After you submit a request, Master Gardeners will schedule a visit, identify invasive plants and produce a report with recommendations for invasive control and removal. Visits are scheduled on a first come, first served basis.

Properties must be located in Loudoun County. While there is no minimum or maximum property size, invasive plants can only be observed on up to 3 acres.

For full program details, visit loudouncountymastergardeners.org/programs/invasive-site-assessment.



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If you are a person with a disability and desire assistance or accommodation, please notify the Loudoun Extension office at 703-777-0373/TDD* during business hours of 8:30 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. *TDD number is (800) 828-1120.