



Bethesda Community

GARDEN CLUB

"Ninety-seven Years of Brightening Lives and Landscapes"

www.bethesdacommunitygardenclub.org

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Drew Asbury, Horticulturist, Hillwood Estate Museum and Gardens

Perhaps you saw Margaret Roach's *New York Times* article October 4, 2020, encouraging us to "Maintain your yard the way the pros do," illustrated with a liberating photograph of a yard with quite a few un-raked leaves. Ms. Roach informs us raking the lawn down to the bare dirt interrupts nature's food chain. Thalassa Cruso, in a book I read long ago, advised not to leave your garden too tidy. All this advice is music to my lazy self. And now we have a talk by **Drew Asbury**, who will bring us up to date with the latest in ecological practices. Drew is the horticulturist at Hillwood Estate and Gardens and has worked in the horticultural industry for 25 years. He graduated from the Longwood Gardens Professional Gardener Training Program in 2006 and obtained a Masters of Professional Studies in Sustainable Landscape Design from GW in 2020. He formed his own company, Drew Asbury Garden Design in 2018.

His presentation will share principles of conservation we can employ in our own gardens that will support biodiversity, as well as filter toxins out of air and water. We will learn how to mimic nature (not so many raked leaves) by using fewer resources, less labor, less time, and less money. Be sure to join our ZOOM meeting on **February 24 at 10:30** to hear Drew's timely tips on reducing all the above by learning sustainable ecological gardening practices.

Jane Malish

Think Plant Sale!

The plant sale committee is exploring the possibilities for this spring's sale. Although we hope to have a mid-May sale, it seems clear that a traditional plant sale to the public will not yet be feasible. Accordingly, we are thinking about doing another online sale, still confined to club members (and any friends and neighbors you may be willing to shop for). Nothing is final yet, but we can all start thinking about what we would be interested in acquiring from a sale and especially about what we might offer.

Do you or your friends and neighbors have beds that need thinning or other editing? Do you know of any houses to be torn down that might have good gardens? Do you like to start seeds that might lead to an overabundance of baby plants? While we wait for the snows to come and go, please consider these questions. Your answers will be important for going forward.



Caroline Turner shared photos taken during a walk in her snowy garden. See more on pages 4 and 6.

Remember, plant sale committee members will be ready to assist if you want help in digging and potting or need advice on what to dig. As more of us become vaccinated, we envision being able (while taking appropriate precautions) to join together on these tasks. Here's hoping!

Barbara Collier

Note change of address

Christine Uffelman
5600 Roosevelt St.
Bethesda, MD 20817

Welcome New Member

Lisa Kennigsberg
14 Winerst Ct.
Potomac, Md 20854
301-332-9945
lisakenigsberg@yahoo.com

Website Report Coming Soon

Please be on the lookout for a report on BCGC's website, which should be hitting your email inboxes shortly. This report was produced by a small ad hoc committee (consisting of Barbara Collier, Mary Horan, Suzanne Grefsheim, Meme Lincoln, and Venil Ramiah), which was established in October 2020 to assess the current website and suggest possible improvements. You may recall being asked to answer a brief survey about the website last month; the survey results are included in the report. (The committee thanks all those who responded.)

The report and recommendations were completed in January and delivered to the board this month, so that it can consider steps to take in response. If you have thoughts on the report's contents or recommendations that you would like to share, please contact me.

Barbara Collier, committee chair

DUES ARE DUE:

RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP NOW

It's time to send in your Garden Club membership dues for the upcoming 2021-22 year. Your dues also include membership in the NCAGC (National Capital Area Garden Clubs, Inc.). We are required to submit our updated member list and dues to the NCAGC by May 1st. So, please send your check in now.

Payable to: **BCGC** or
Bethesda Community Garden Club

Amount: **\$40.**

Due Date: **April 1, 2021**

Mail to: Margy Tritschler
P.O. Box 25
Garrett Park, MD 20896

Environmental Concerns

Barbara Collier

Splendors in the Grasses

Most of our best-known native ornamental grasses are warm-season bunch grasses, such as switchgrass and little bluestem. These are gratifying to grow both for beauty and for wildlife value, and they also make invaluable ground covers. Accordingly, I have become interested in propagating them.

If you have a specimen of one of these, the most straightforward method of propagation is division in the spring. Be sure you can see growth beginning before you strike: the roots of these grasses will not establish well unless the plant is actively growing. You want to avoid cleaning them up too soon anyway, since they provide excellent winter interest in the garden—not to mention seeds for birds to eat and stalks for insect habitat. Wait till at least March before removing the old stalks to look for the new green spikes coming in.

If you want grasses to seed themselves, they need clear space for the seed to drop and germinate. How much will depend on how enthu-

siastic the particular grass is, and on how well it can withstand competition. (Of course, if you don't want the seed heads to make new plants, you can remove them, but leave the stalks if you can.)

My first native bunchgrass was a very tall cultivar (7 to 8 ft) of switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum* 'Cloud Nine', chosen for its ability to grow in partial shade. This handsome, upright grass has pinkish, airy flower panicles. For over a decade, my original specimen grew slowly and unspectacularly, barely blooming, as its bed became less and less sunny. Then I moved the clump to a sunnier spot, and it flourished to the point of gigantism. It became so massive that it had to be divided and moved again, and finally given away to the Connie Morella Library. Amidst all this division, it also managed to set stray seedlings here and there (not entirely unwelcome, since part of the garden recently developed a need for some tall screening).

The sunnier spot mentioned above, which opened when a large street tree was removed about 10 years ago, accommodated not only the first move of the switchgrass, but also a specimen of little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*). This popular grass has handsome bluish or grayish foliage that turns coppery in the fall. Its relative shortness (2 or 3 ft until it blooms to 4 to 5 ft) also makes it a useful filler in a garden setting. So I was pleased when my specimen began seeding itself. The planting area was propitious for self-seeding: after the straggly lawn had been smothered and covered with wood chips, the first plantings had little initial competition. With the beds now filled in, the volunteers show up (as usual) mostly in the paths.

Expanding my grass horizons, I began a winter-sowing experiment with seeds of purple love grass (*Erogrostis spectabilis*) planted in old plug trays. As a warm-season grass, it did not sprout till late spring, and I found myself having to watch over the wispy seedlings in the plug trays (which dry out fast and require fre-

The terms for the major categories of grasses—bunch versus spreading or sod-forming, and warm-season versus cool-season—are reasonably self-explanatory. Bunch grasses are clumpers, whereas sod-forming grasses spread by stolons or rhizomes. Warm-season grasses grow most vigorously and bloom in the summer, slowing down in cool weather. Cool-season grasses do most of their growing in cool weather, blooming in spring and slowing down in summer. (I don't go into sod-forming grasses here, but Maryland has a less than ideal climate for lawn grasses: too cold for the warm-season ones and too hot for the cool-season ones. Maryland lawns have to be a mix of both.)

quent watering) till I could plant out the little clumps in mid-July on a sunny, bare hillside. They managed to bloom the first year and put on a good show in their second year. This lovely, short (2 ft) grass has multi-season interest, with purple flower spikes and foliage turning from blue-green to bronze.

I was also lucky to acquire several mature clumps of northern sea oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) from fellow club member Caroline Turner (who had tired of its enthusiastic spreading). Its virtues are its familiar nodding, spangly seed heads and ability to thrive in moist part-shade. Since I have a large area to cover, I will find out how much seeding and division will do the trick.

Finally, confession time: a few years back, when I decided to try a mini-meadow, I did a lot of stuff wrong—most seriously, failing to include enough grasses. You need 50 to 80 percent grasses in a meadow to support and protect the tall wildflowers and crowd out weeds. I didn't include nearly enough. (Why, you ask? Many reasons, but basically, as Dr. Johnson once said, "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance.")

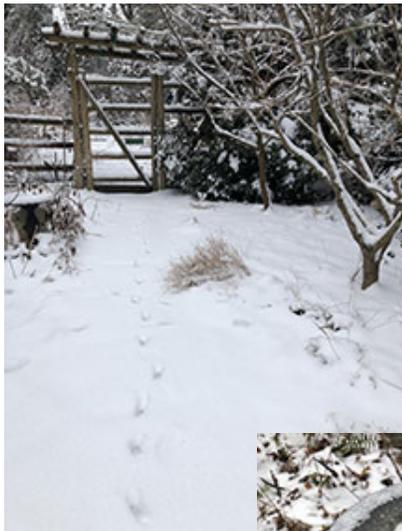
Still, the meadow does have some grass; one that I like is purpletop (*Tridens flavus*), a tall

Continued on next page

grass with an airy structure and purple seed heads, which has good wildlife value. It managed to grow from seed scattered when I first started the project, but since it is supposed to be slow growing and dislike too much competition, I need to monitor it. I think it would be a good garden ornamental: it will tolerate some shade.

Another bunchgrass volunteered in various garden paths: broomsedge (*Andropogon virginicus*). A drought-tolerant sun-lover, it is a little blowsy looking, but its foliage is reddish orange in fall and even in winter dormancy, making it an attractive ornamental in the right situation. I decided it would be a good addition to the meadow, and proceeded to prove the folly of fall transplanting by trying to move clumps too late. But there is plenty more trying to colonize my paths, so I still hope it will help me shift the grass/forb balance in the meadow. So now I take seed heads from all my grasses and toss them in the meadow, trying to make up for my original sin.

Caroline Turner's Garden



Connie Morella Library

Jeanne Weiss

What are we dealing with and who are we?

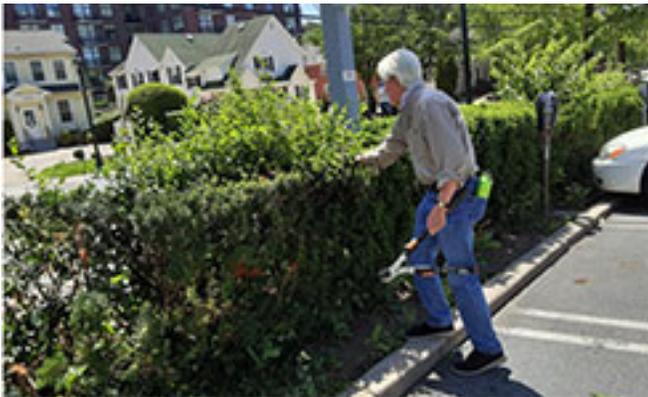
Allow me to address some of the challenges first. As the summer of 2020 rolled on, the temperatures in Bethesda reached truly uncomfortable highs, at and above the 90's, in which case the asphalt temperatures at the Connie Morella Library parking lot reached into the 110's, 120's or 130's degrees. What plants will agree to grow in parking lot islands with such heat radiating from their surroundings? And who will agree to water these plants when rain is sparse to none?

The answer to the latter question is: Maj-Britt Dohlie, Hillary Fitis, Betsy James, Candy Kessel, Deborah Peck, Sharon Wright and me. Some volunteered to water several weeks. They never know when they sign up on the schedule whether their week will be hot and dry or rainy. They don't know when the nozzles will break, spigots won't turn on or off, hoses will be sliced or, in fact, stolen.

The answer to the former question is: quite a few plants agreed to grow. They were helped along by a serendipitous huge chip dump from Asplundh, which was trimming trees around the library and whose workers were persuaded to give us their chips which we then spread around the new trees and the islands. It was hard work. We don't usually mulch, which is expensive, and most of us would prefer ground cover. However, the chips were free, and they helped retain moisture, and limit the effect of extreme heat or freezing on the soil.

Now, who helped maintain the library grounds? The above-named stalwarts plus Margaret Edison (who is also in charge of maintaining the Davis Library), Nancy Davidian, Maj-Britt's husband (Mike Evenson) and Gwen's husband (Bela), and David Barnes.

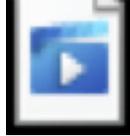
Mike helped the day David Barnes sawed down his second set of dead yews. (He did the same in 2019.) We needed a crew for all the work this project generated.



Leslie Clark, Property Manager II of the MoCo Department of General Services sent us a proviso: "The new waste vendor may not pull the trash if there is yard waste in the trash cans," so no guarantee the waste would be picked up. Hmmmmmm.



Strangely, these several yews alongside the east side of the library died.



Here is Bela working. There are some strange sound effects, not from Bela.

Here is the result of Bela's work.



We will figure out what to plant here. Do you have suggestions? Would you like to join us?

It's now time to trim back the tall grasses. Below are the switchgrasses planted alongside the parking lot to replace dead yews in 2019 and 2020. Switchgrass doesn't mind if the salt-laden snow is piled on top of them. They don't mind heat or drought. They meet the requirement about which Leslie educated us that we not block sight-lines within the parking lot and that an appropriately tall border separate the inside of the lot from the outside of the lot. Look at the upper left of the photograph. That's the new ZOM project to be called Maizon Bethesda. <https://www.maizonbethesda.com/> You may recall that this group



Switchgrass border with Maizon Bethesda in upper left

proposed to improve the landscaping south of the library for around \$200-250,000, which sadly did come close to what they actually owed because they did not meet the county requirements for public green space for new construction projects. Never mind.

How do I know it's time to trim the tall grasses?

Here is how I know. On my walk yesterday, I ran across Manuel and his Bethesda Urban Partnership (BUP) crew where Woodmont Ave., Leland St. and Strathmore Ave. come together. They were cutting back the tall grasses in that area. Manuel assured me that now is the right time, and that new growth will begin in March. I may have mentioned in an earlier report that Jeff Burton, the BUP director, agreed to have his crew water the new trees at the library.



Photos by Jeanne Weiss

Bethesda Urban Partnership loading cut grasses

We hope/think that BUP will continue to partner with us in watering trees because we are going to get six new understory trees thanks to Maj-Britt.

Kristin Taddei of Reforest Montgomery proposed the following: two American hornbeams, eastern redbud, flowering dogwood, and two American hollies. Leslie Clark agreed. Our new librarian, Eric Carzon agreed. By the way, Eric also agreed that we may acquire a hose storage box with a lockable hasp to help protect our yet-to-be-bought hose replacements from theft.

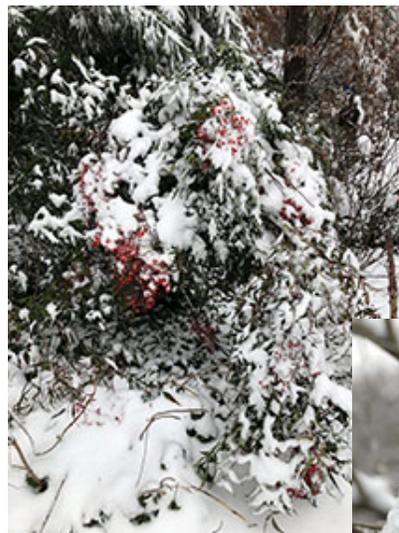
By now, you can see that we have an expansive group of collaborators. I have not yet men-

tioned Joan Greenbaum, president of our local Friends of the Library, and her committee who have paid for quite a few plants. She has even agreed to lend us her personal chainsaw in case we need to cut down more dead yews.

As spring unfolds, look for Betsy's red tulips and golden Alexanders, Candy's snowdrops, Gwen's impatiens, Maj-Britt's re-planted wild geraniums and wood asters (I prefer not to get into CER Lawn and Landscaping, Inc and their practices in this report). Look for irises relocated from the southwest corner of the library to the exit island by Edgemoor, and a couple of beautyberries and a serviceberry in the cleaned up southwest corner. The sedges will likely return as well. Such are the results of personal initiative and flat out scrounging.

2021 is Bethesda's Susquicentennial year

We mask; we distance; and we work safely. We welcome you to work with us and share your ideas and initiatives with the Connie Morella Library grounds committee. Our names and emails can be found in your directory. We hope to hear from you.



The Snowy Garden

photos by Caroline Turner

Ellen Seagraves' Arrangements (from the January meeting)

