



Bethesda Community

GARDEN CLUB

"Ninety-seven Years of Brightening Lives and Landscapes"

www.bethesdacommunitygardenclub.org

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A Different Speaker at the January 27 Meeting

Unfortunately **Judy Zatsick**, who is the head gardener at Oak Spring, Bunny Mellon's famous manicured acres at Upperville, Va., will not be able to address the club due to circumstances beyond her control. I am disappointed but Judy did say she would be agreeable to organizing a club visit to the garden itself when times allow for folks to congregate. So that is a bit of a consolation.

Instead, **Ellen Seagraves**, a local floral designer for the past 25 years, has agreed to share her expertise. There have been several requests for speakers on flower arranging but the logistics of members seated in the audience's back rows being able to see has always deterred inviting such a person. Now, however, that we're meeting through ZOOM, everyone will be able to see the same thing as everyone else.

Ellen has a BFA in weaving from the School for American Craftsmen but found her true vocation in flower arranging, which she has been doing for a quarter century. She has continued to learn about the skill through the designer group IFDA and she has studied with many well-known floral designers. She is certified by the American Institute of Floral Design and she also has a European Masters' Certificate.

Please do join the club for Ellen's ZOOM presentation at **10:30am, Wednesday morning, January 27, 2021** for ideas you can use to freshen up your bouquets.

Going Native?

Many native plant enthusiasts worry about how purist to be in their plant choices: Native to this county, state, or wider region? Local ecotype (see note in sidebar on the next page) or whatever is available? Straight species or cultivar?

The answers to this kind of question depend on what you are trying to do. If you are engaged in a project to restore a wild area, clearly you will be purist with your choices, concentrating on encouraging more of the natives that already grow there or grew there recently (while removing any invasive species). In this case, it's important to get as close as possible to ecotypes of species documented as growing in the local area now or in the past.

Most of us, however, are dealing with smaller gardens, some of which may be quite urban. If you are in city or suburb, gardening on whatever soil the most recent builders put there, you are not going to be restoring



Caroline Turner shares a taste of spring: Forced Paperwhites on sunny kitchen window sill
See more on page 4.

an ecosystem. The conditions may be so different that you have about as much chance of recreating the ecology before European settlement as of establishing a rainforest. But you can still think about choosing plants to support insects, birds, and other urban wildlife, while recognizing that the built environment imposes many constraints. Many native plant enthusiasts argue that natives are easier to grow and maintain because they evolved under the local conditions; that argument utterly fails if, say, you put a less competitive moisture lover like tiarella in a dry area, especially if it's in competition with a rampant generalist like golden ragwort. The principle of "right plant, right place" is as imperative as ever. Trying to plant species that require conditions you simply don't have is a waste of your time and money.

Often, however, it may be hard to know if your garden fills the ecological bill that your desired plants need. If you are patient and want to throw the dice a little, try seeds! Whether you prepare a spot and direct sow (or try a little winter sowing in outdoor containers—see previous newsletters of February 2019 and November 2017), you can see if those borderline conditions in your garden are sufficient for your chosen plant. (Hint: if germination is copious and robust, your plant may not be fussy.)

For more immediate gratification, of course, you need actual plants. There are more native plant nurseries (many with online options) than there used to be, so your ability to find the species you want is improving all the time. These nurseries are also excellent sources of information on conditions and habits. More generalist nurseries are increasingly carrying native species, although often, both because of market conditions and ease of propagation, these may be cultivars.

To figure out if using a cultivar may undercut your interest in supporting wildlife, there are some rules of thumb: for instance, the most extreme variations in flower color, size, or shape (double flowers and the like) are more

Note: Individual species having a large geographical distribution vary considerably in such characteristics as plant height, growth habits, maturation dates, leaf appearance, and reproductive habits. These characteristics are not distributed randomly throughout the range of the species but are clustered into ecological regions... Plants within these ecological regions are known as ecotypes. —USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Technical Note No: TX-PM-10-5

likely to be problematic for pollinators, and changes in leaf color may reduce a plant's benefit for insects looking for hosts.

On the other hand, a cultivar that has less disease susceptibility or better garden performance can be a better long-term choice, if it reduces maintenance or replacement costs. So not only may a cultivar be more available, it could be the right choice: for example, space may dictate a dwarf tree or shrub cultivar or a perennial variety that spreads less aggressively than a straight species.

When choosing a cultivar, you can consult research on their attractiveness to pollinators or usefulness as host plants (Mt. Cuba Center offers many resources on this topic). As this research has shown, it is not the case that cultivars always have less wildlife value in the garden than straight species; there is a great deal of variation. For example, Mt. Cuba reports that "With a top rank in both horticultural and ecological evaluations, *Phlox paniculata* 'Jeana' is hard to beat."

Another wrinkle in the decision-making process is climate change. For long-lived woody plants especially, East Coast native species that thrive in USDA zones further south may be a better choice in the long run than those whose native range is further north. Oakleaf hydrangea and southern magnolia, for

example, although widely grown in our area, are not native to Maryland, but to states further south. A couple of years ago I planted *Illicium floridanum*, which is native to the southeast but widely grown in Zones 7 to 10 as a garden plant for moist shade. My hope is that as it grows into its full size, it remains unfazed by what our warming climate throws at it. (Whether I will or not is another story.)

Barbara Collier

Editor's note:

Since we don't have our usual photos from previous meetings, we're asking members to share pictures from their gardens. Please email them to Lois: dnleb@aol.com.

HORTICULTURAL NOTES

Replacing Invasives with Natives

Carole Ottesen

Not too long ago, the last of some thousand or more barberry shrubs that had invaded the little woodland behind my house was dug out. Now what remains are tall trees and a few wildflowers—mainly jacks—but virtually no surviving native understory except for American hollies. There is plenty of basket grass, Japanese stilt grass, garlic mustard, wild onion, poison ivy, and honeysuckle. Unfortunately, the deer find holly the most palatable—proof positive that hungry deer will eat even the prickliest of leaves. After spraying hollies with deer-off to discourage browsing, the hollies have made noticeable gains in size in just a few months.

Because deer are omnipresent, a first impulse was to remove swaths of invasives and replant their areas with proven deer-resistant plants such as hellebores, *Epimedium*, and *Sarcococca*. A better, but more difficult plan is to seek out native plants that deer generally ignore that thrive in part to full shade. Plenty of books and lists on this subject exist, but the preponderance of plants are either sun-loving or, despite being listed as “deer-resistant,” those that have been tried—such as trilliums, sumac, lobelia, and mountain laurel—are devoured

Shrubs

Among the few plants that deer shun are a few that have survived in my garden. The evergreen and highly toxic mountain and coastal doghobbles (*Leucothoe fontanesiana* and *L. axillaris*) head the list. Well-named for arching stems that do not invite traffic, both thrive in shade.

Coastal dog hobble reaches only about 3 feet. Mountain doghobble grows to 6 feet. Their shiny, evergreen, pendant stems are best in winter. Sensitive to wind and heat, both bear fragrant, drooping bell-shaped flowers in spring. Both tolerate pruning.

Other deer-resistant native shrubs that are loved by other wildlife include the nannyberry and arrowwood viburnums (*V. lentago* and *V. dentatum*). Growing to 15 and 20 feet respectively, they provide summer berries and fall color and are at home in part-shade. Arrowwood viburnum sometimes produces suckers that can be transplanted.

Blooming in part-shade, buckeyes seem unbothered by deer. Bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*) is a wide-spreading shrub

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that reaches about 10 x 18 feet and bears showy foot-long white flower plumes in summer. Red buckeye (*A. pavia*) has red flowers and often its leaves also emerge red. It becomes a small tree of about 15 feet that enjoys a bit of morning sun.

Ground cover

Ferns have been real workhorses that flourish unscathed as groundcover. Evergreen Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) makes graceful progress in a moist, shady place while ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) has an almost terrifying ability to reproduce.

Bluestar (*Amsonia* spp), a more moderate spreader, self-sows into high ground cover that turns bright orange in fall. Pussytoes (*Antennaria plantaginifolia*) spread nicely, can be pulled easily, but, being only inches tall, are usually not a problem.

Last but not least, Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) emerge in spring, are spectacular in bloom, but, like daffodils, go out messily. However, their demise dovetails nicely with the emergence of some ferns.

Hard and fast rules don't seem to work when wildlife is a factor. While there is probably nothing that a starving deer won't browse, there are a few plants that are its last resorts.

Photos from Our Members:



Caroline Turner photographed Winter Jasmine branches cut from the January garden blooming indoors.