



# Bethesda Community

GARDEN CLUB

*"Ninety-eight Years of Brightening Lives and Landscapes"*

[www.bethesdacommunitygardenclub.org](http://www.bethesdacommunitygardenclub.org)

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## DWARF AND SLOW GROWING CONIFERS

*Jane Malish*

I planted some hemlocks alongside my driveway to provide a screen for my own and my neighbor's yards. I knew (and know) nothing about hemlocks or any other conifers except they have skinny needles instead of broad leaves and they don't lose them in winter. How was I to know that these hemlocks would grow to be 20 ft. tall. Some of them have recently been afflicted with a gnawing insect and are unsightly and no doubt perishing. They were the wrong plant in the wrong place as far as I'm concerned.

**Joe Meny** is the curator of the William T. Gotelli Dwarf and Slow Growing Conifer Collection at the National Arboretum. Joe can recommend an evergreen that would have been a better choice for my screen. As for Mr. Gotelli, he was a wealthy New Jersey contractor who developed an abiding interest in conifers. Was he searching for the perfect foundation and landscaping plant??? He built a collection of 800 or so specimens (not all of them dwarf or slow growing) at his New Jersey home and when he decided to move to an apartment he donated his 800 evergreens, dug them all up and sent them to the National Arboretum.

Joe has graciously agreed to share his knowledge of conifers that do well in our area. Don't miss this opportunity to hear his ideas on what might be the perfect evergreen for the planters on your front porch or the screen-instead-of-a-fence for your back yard. And here's a link to the Gotelli Conifer Collection: <https://usna.usda.gov/discover/gardens-collections/gotelli>

The meeting featuring Joe Meny's presentation will be on **November 17** at 10:30 a.m., exclusively on Zoom. You will receive an email with the meeting link in advance.

## Connie Morella Library Project

*Jeanne Weiss*

On November 4, an awesome group of BCGC volunteers executed yet another self-validating project: We spread over a cubic yard of Bloom woody blend over more than the originally intended 174 square yards, and in addition, spread nearly 150 pounds of cured Bloom over a circumference of 3 feet around 21 trees that BCGC had planted over the last several years.

The former was added to the islands and peninsulas of the Connie Morella Library parking lot where plants went to die, followed by the



*Photo by Carole Ottesen*

**Carole Ottesen shares her knowledge of deer-resistant plants, like these Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*). See her Horticultural Notes on page 3 for more recommendations.**

assessment, “The soil is terrible.” And so it was. Attempts to coax anything to grow met the same dismal end.

Therefore, when April Thompson, Director of Bloom Marketing, gave a talk to the October 7 Montgomery County Master Gardening meeting, that got my attention. She spoke about Bloom products, among which are biosolids made from the DC Blue Plains Wastewater Treatment Plant, and the “...recycling of nitrogen and phosphorus back into local soils.”

I figured the Bloom products were worth a try given the problems most plants seemed to have in the parking lot islands, so I wrote April explaining our challenges: very hot blacktop in summer, dry conditions, awful soil, etc. April suggested the appropriate products. Betsy James and I measured the areas that should be covered, the figures were sent to April, and she calculated the amounts we would need.

That’s how we arrived at the November 4 event. The volunteers signed up. I didn’t really know how we would get this done; neither did our volunteers, yet they volunteered anyway. The cubic yard of woody blend was dumped in a pile, not bagged. Our members broke it up into mostly 5 gallon amounts placed into 13 gallon plastic biodegradable kitchen trash bags which were then delivered in the correct amounts to each of the parking lot islands.

Then they spread the product over the area to a one-quarter inch depth.

We started at 9:00 a.m. It was probably close to 32 degrees, but no one had a chance to get really cold because by 10:00, the job was mostly



completed over the islands, which were the intended objectives of our labors. And we still had a LOT of woody blend left. Mary Stanley, who had arrived early along with Maria Brown, asked if they could spread

more around elsewhere, and then these women got to it—again: in no special order, Candy Kessel, Mary Stanley, Gwen Stewart, Dawn Landsman, Maria Brown, Blaca Reubansaal, Sylvia Diss, Nancy Davidian, Mary Horan, Betsy James, and Holly Joseph. I sure hope I didn’t forget anyone.

Before 11:00, the job of spreading the woody blend was virtually completed, and there was still a lot of product remaining. So these women bagged the remainder and brought the bags to an out-of-sight storage area. These women just worked very very hard and resolved problems I had not even considered as smoothly as if they did this every day.

Now for the trees. Only Maj-Britt knew where all the trees were, so it fell to her to break up the 3 bags, each weighing fifty pounds, into lots of 7 pounds each, using the same kitchen trash bags as above. This proved to be a task needing more than one person. Blanca Rubensaal joined her in dividing up cured blend. At this point, I do not know who else joined in that effort because so much was happening. Gwen Stewart was getting a head start on the planting by putting in some black-eyed Susans in one of the just treated islands. Betsy Stewart clipped back some crape myrtles. What happened was that volunteers who had con-



flicts came as soon as they could and, the main job being unexpectedly completed,

took on other tasks. We thought 3 hours would be enough, maybe, but 2 hours? Never. These women even watered some areas where they had spread the biosolids.

From beginning to end, everyone went beyond their usual wonderful selves. Even the delivery guy, Doug Teeter, showed me photos of his kids and left us with a lot of extra woody blend which is why we had so much left over.

Dawn suggested that a visit to the Blue Plains Plant would be interesting for the club. She has seen it and found it really interesting, and this is where our products started. Since November 4, Candy procured 2 inkberry bushes, which Nina Stark-Slapnik planted on one of the treated areas in the north end of the parking lot. I have watered the remaining treated areas still feeling gratitude for all the good will. I hate to mention this, but some of the carefully stored bags of biosolids, hidden away, have disappeared. The good part is that one of the guys from CER Lawn and Landscaping (with whom we have a sometimes strained relationship because they remove our plants, cut back bushes that should not be trimmed, or otherwise work counter to our efforts), helped move all the remaining bags to a secure location inside the fenced area, away from public access. That is just a reminder that there's a bit of imperfection in seemingly perfect events.

For now, we must wait until our next growing season to see what happens. Thanks so much to all who made this happen.

## What's happening with the Plant Sale?

*Mary Horan*

It's on! The sale will be held on **May 12** outside the Farm Women's Market in downtown Bethesda. This plan, of course, may evolve as the pandemic evolves. Watch for updates in the newsletter and through email blasts.

Several members of the plant sale committee recently spent two happy hours dividing and potting perennials in member Judith Hackett's garden. Elaine Hope, Karin Kelleher, Carol Logun, Janine Trudeau, Judy Termini and I had a tour of Judith's lovely garden as she pointed out the plants she wanted us to thin. Elaine gave a quick lesson on potting, and we created over 20 pots for the Plant Sale. What fun it was to return to a favorite club activity—working together on a sunny afternoon.

If you dug and potted donations for the Plant Sale, help them to overwinter by keeping them watered and protected from critters. If you would like to donate plants from your garden but would find digging and potting physically challenging, we may be able to help. Please contact Judy Termini or Elaine Hope to discuss assistance or for any other Plant Sale questions.

## Environmental Concerns

*Barbara Collier*

### Go, Thou Winter Weed!

Last month I was finding and destroying invasive grasses. This month it's not even winter, yet the winter weeds are already staring us in the face. Fortunately, when it comes to weeding, I find cool weather a lot more energizing than heat, so the appearance of hairy bittercress, chickweed, henbit, deadnettle, and other annual annoyances may daunt but should not terrify. Now is the time to hunt out all these annual weed seedlings (as we know, some cunningly hide under fallen leaves) and attack other persistent weeds that escaped us this year. We all know that weeding and mulching now will make next spring much more pleasant.

Even if you're being an ecological gardener (leaving the fallen leaves and letting your perennial stalks stand to provide wildlife food and habitat), enough plant material has withered and died down that it can be easier to get at those winter annual weeds, as well as perennial undesirable creepers like ground ivy, English ivy, honeysuckle, creeping euonymus, porcelain berry, mock strawberries, creeping Jenny (if you don't want it), invasive wineberry, and [insert your worst bane here]. As I crawl around hunting among the fallen leaves and dried plant stalks, another common weed is little tree seedlings. I enjoy pulling them out, stripping the leaves, and tossing them all back into the leaf litter to add a little extra mulch. Disposing of the others takes different approaches: some get composted; prickly things and those with berries get bagged for the county compost. I usually pile tough vines in various corners to dry out completely and provide a little shelter habitat, but they take a long time to get brittle, so the county bag is a good option if that approach doesn't work for you.

You may have heard the advice to cut weeds repeatedly, rather than pulling, since pulling disturbs soil and can bring up new weed seeds to sprout. It could be a little late in the season to start trying this approach, unless it's a weed that will die over winter anyway; in that case, leaving the roots underground to break down is good for the soil. This method will not work for hairy bittercress at this time of year, as it will have ample opportunity to sprout from its roots; in undisciplined parts of my yard, I have found that the hairy bittercress is already well past the seedling stage, so I have to pull and add mulch.

In any case, many of the winter annuals that are sprouting now have such tiny seedlings that pulling leads to minimal soil disturbance. And if you do need to disturb the soil, you can consider—as long as you're scratching the soil surface anyway—putting down spent stalks of

cardinal flower or other self seeders for next season. And of course, trying to cut and starve ground ivy is hopeless, so some disturbance is inevitable. I am trying to pull it out everywhere I see it (far too many places) and then get in with the deep mulch. Maybe next year I will be vigilant and stop it from getting so well established. Hope (like ground ivy) springs eternal.

## HORTICULTURAL NOTES

# *Deer Resistance*

Carole Ottesen

In recent years, more and more attention has been focused on plants that deer tend to pass by. Now, the term “deer resistant” shows up helpfully on nursery tags and in catalogs and in long lists on the internet. All recommendations come with the caveat that goes something like “deer will eat anything if hungry enough.” Nevertheless, information about their dislikes greatly assists in the selection of new subjects for garden beds in deer country—which seems to be almost everywhere.

Sometimes, there are further constraints to finding a new plant that will survive deer browse. For example, if you wish to limit the plant palette to natives, the array of deer resistant possibilities shrinks dramatically. It diminishes further if the places you hope to landscape are in varying degrees of shade—and even further if you want the new plants to out-compete aggressive aliens like Japanese stilt grass and basket grass. Thankfully, there are some real stars out there.



Ostrich fern

Foremost among the survivors are the ferns. One that spreads into colonies is ostrich fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)—typically two to four feet tall. It is a clumper that sends out vigorous rhizomes when established. As well as quickly outcompeting shorter weeds in

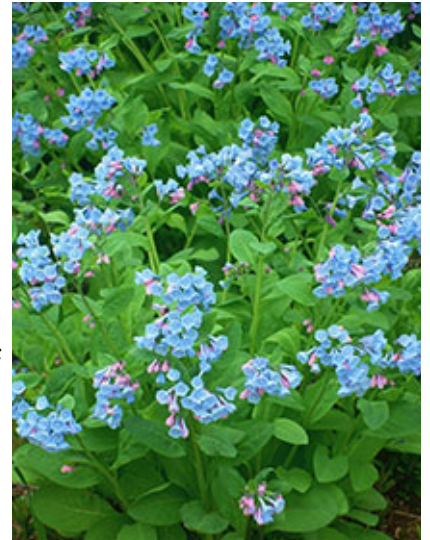
part shade, it will survive in full shade and produces edible fiddleheads into the bargain. Its one great fault is a bedraggled appearance in fall.

Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*), one of the delights of spring, self-sows wantonly, producing more and more sensational shows as the years pass. Like daffodils, Virginia bluebells disappear in early summer, but rotate beautifully with the late spring emergence of perennials like lady fern (*Athyrium filix-femina*).

A native perennial that is showy throughout the growing season and then some, threadleaf bluestar (*Amsonia hubrichtii*) starts off in late spring producing delicate blue flowers.

Thereafter, throughout the summer, its bright-green, three-foot clump of feathery foliage is an attractive addition to a perennial bed. Finally, in the fall, the foliage colors a bright orange. Bluestar self-sows with abandon.

A rock solid, deer-resistant shrub, vigorous bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*)



Virginia bluebells



*Amsonia hubrichtii*

blooms in shade where it will sucker into colonies. In fall, its foliage colors a cheerful gold. It can reach 15 feet tall, but generally grows to about eight feet tall. Its relative, red buckeye (*A. pavia*) produces lovely red flowers. Seeds of both plants are toxic.

Two completely deer proof shrubs are dog hobble (*Leucothoe fontanesiana*), a native of the southern mountains, and its lower-growing coastal relative (*L. axillaris*). Their highly toxic, but very attractive shiny, evergreen leaves arch gracefully over the ground.

Sometimes toxicity, aggressive rhizomes, vigorous growth and wanton self-sowing are virtues.



*Aesculus pavia*

*Photos by Carole Ottesen*