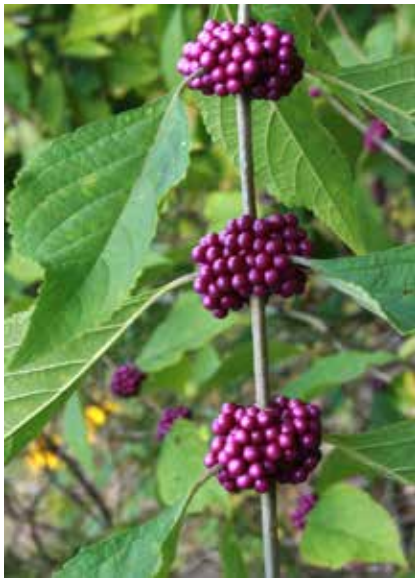
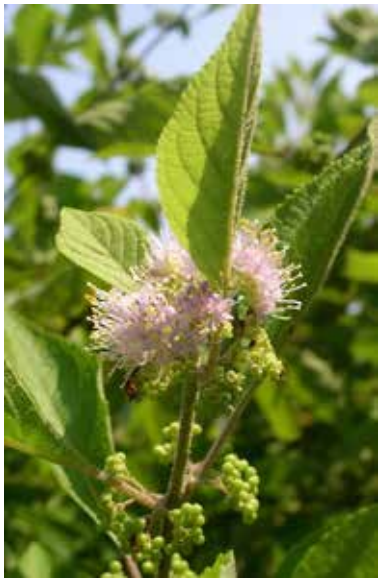
Wildflower Spot – October 2006
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

American Beautyberry

Callicarpa americana

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*





A truly spectacular shrub of early fall. Also called French mulberry, beautyberry is a multi-stemmed shrub six feet tall with unusual colored fruit. In late summer the fuzzy pink flowers attract pollinators. By September, glistening deep rose-pink berries encircle the nodes, where two leaves also emerge. There is a white-berried albino, variety *alba*.

Birds love this plant, and so do homeowners who want a space-filling, fast-growing colorful shrub. Mockingbirds will sit on the plant and eat the berries one at a time. The berries are edible for human consumption, but don't have much flavor. They are delicious when made into jelly.

Beautyberry prefers sun and soil a little moist, and flowers on new growth. It can be pruned to about a foot tall in late winter just before the leaves appear. This will make it much fuller, reduce the shrub height, and produce more berries.

The roots, leaves and branches of the American beautyberry were used by Native American tribes for various medicinal purposes. Parts of the plant were prepared for treatment of rheumatism, stomachaches, dysentery, and colic, among other ailments.

The long-lasting fruits of beautyberry provide food for birds and animals well into the winter months when other food sources are unavailable. ❖

Photo: American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2007
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Swamp/Narrow-Leaved Sunflower

Helianthus angustifolius

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Swamp sunflower produces a striking bold fountain of three-inch golden daisy-like flowers, resembling black-eyed Susan with purple-black disks. Blooming from August through October along with wild ageratum, the blue and gold 3-6-feet tall flowers look wonderful against any green background such as tall shrubs. Butterflies love the nectar, and later the seeds are eaten by many eastern birds.

Since the plant branches freely, and blooms profusely, swamp sunflower is best used in masses in the landscape. Growing best in full sun, and well-drained soil, it is native to low wetland areas, and may need some irrigation in dry weather. This plant is doing well in tidewater, even with the current dry conditions.

The narrow leaves are stiff and alternate on the stem, but usually appear opposite lower on the plant.

Native range for swamp sunflower is from Long Island to southern Indiana.

Expect to find a lot of "volunteers" as this plant self-sows freely. Also, many plantlets develop around the base of the plant, providing a growing clump. Plants are easily propagated by dividing offspring.. ❖

Photo: Swamp/Narrow-Leaved Sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius) taken by Jan Newton*
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Blue Vervain

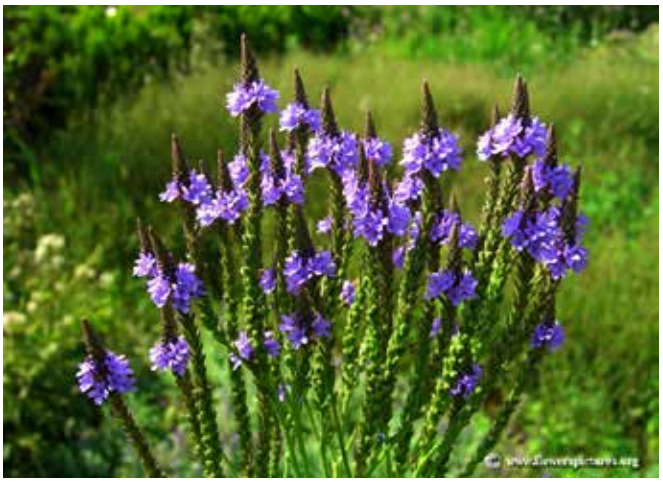
Verbena SPP.

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Blue Vervain, Verbena hastata, occurs broadly in piedmont and mountain areas of Virginia and in a few counties in the coastal plain. Growing 2-6 feet tall, clusters of many pencil-like spikes of small five-petaled flowers grow at the ends of the branches. The flowers bloom a few at a time, advancing toward the pointed tip. The stem is grooved and four-sided. This species can be found in moist thickets, meadows and roadsides, growing best in well-drained soil. The Narrow-leaved Vervain, Verbena simplex, is not as showy as Blue Vervain because it grows only about half as tall and its spikes of flowers occur singly (or in threes) at the tip of the stem or branches. As its name implies, this species also has narrower leaves. It occurs more commonly in the coastal plain than does the Blue Vervain.

White Vervain, Verbena urticifolia is common in nearly every county in Virginia. Its spikes of small white flowers are very slender; the stems are usually hairy, with egg-shaped and coarsely toothed leaves.

Blue, White, and Narrow-leaved Vervains are tall and/or erect species. In contrast, Verbena canadensis (*Glandularia canadensis*) has a prostrate and spreading growth form. It has been found growing



wild in only 3 counties in Virginia: James City, Surry, and Virginia Beach. In nature, the color of its flowers typically ranges from pink to purple, but red and white-flowered variants are available in garden centers. These showy flowers are borne in wide, rounded clusters.

All verbenas are heat and drought tolerant, attractive to butterflies and hummingbirds. Non-native verbenas such as V. bonariensis can be invasive.

Native Americans and 19th century physicians brewed a leaf tea from *V. hastata* as a "female tonic"; Cotton Mather recommended a decoction with honey as a remedy for consumption. ❖

Wildflower Spot – October 2009
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Woolgrass

Scirpus cyperinus

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This perennial sedge grows to 6 feet tall, usually in large clumps, and often in extensive colonies. The leaves are long and conspicuous, especially the basal ones. The flower-heads are large, the branches arching and drooping. In late summer-fall, the 6-12 inch fruit clusters are red-brown and very fuzzy. Woolgrass goes dormant in winter, but adds a good deal of interest with the standing foliage.

Woolgrass is common in wet places, roadside ditches, marshes, swamps and wet meadows. Not limited to soggy areas, it can easily be grown in normally moist flower gardens, effectively grouped with orange coneflower, cardinal flower, hibiscus and Joe-pye weed. The seedheads are particularly attractive against a background of green trees and shrubs. This sedge is native to most counties of Virginia, ranging from eastern Texas to Newfoundland. Blooms July-October.

This is one of several important species of wetland plants that provide food and cover for waterfowl and other wildlife. The seeds are eaten by waterfowl, and the roots by muskrats and geese. Woolgrass is good for erosion control by streams and ponds. ❖

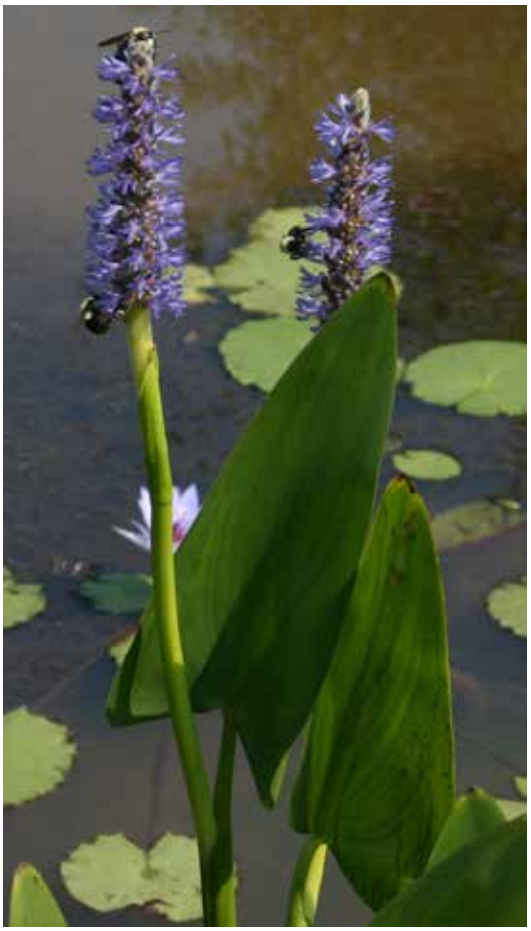
Photo: Woolgrass (Scirpus cyperinus) taken by Helen Hamilton in the Williamsburg Botanical Garden in Freedom Park.
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2010
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Pickerel-Weed

Pontederia cordata
Pontederiaceae (Water-hyacinth Family)

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*



In late summer and fall, the tall blue spikes of Pickerel-Weed are distinctive in aquatic habitats. Blooming from the bottom up, the deep blue flowers are nectar sources for butterflies. This native perennial is often 3 feet tall, with long, heart-shaped leaves.

A good wetland plant, Pickerel-weed grows in marshes, shallow water and freshwater ditches, from Nova Scotia to Minnesota to South America. It is found in the coastal and piedmont counties in Virginia, and blooms June-November. The preferred growing conditions are full to partial sun and shallow water to wet mucky soil. Pickerel-weed is an emergent aquatic plant that doesn't like to dry out.

The large edible seeds are eaten occasionally by various ducks, including the mallard, black duck, green-winged teal, and wood duck. Muskrats and white-tailed deer occasionally browse on the foliage. When this plant forms dense colonies, it provides cover for fish and other aquatic wildlife.

Pickerel-weed has often been used for food. Each fruit contains a nutritious, starchy seed that can be eaten straight from the plant or dried and added to granola and other cereals. The dried seeds can also be boiled, roasted or ground into flour. The young leaves have sometimes been eaten raw in salads or boiled and served with butter, and the seeds can be eaten like nuts.

The common name suggests that this plant, as well as the fish known as pickerel, occupy the same habitat.

This species is related to the infamous Water Hyacinth (*Eichhornia crassipes*), which clogs waterways in many areas of southeastern United States. The introduced Water Hyacinth has similar blue-violet flowers (although larger in size), but it has stubby leaves that float on water. ❖

Photo: Pickerel-weed (*Pontederia cordata)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Common Hackberry

Celtis occidentalis

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

The bark of this small to large tree is distinctive – it is gray to light brown, smooth with corky warts or ridges. The crown is rounded and the branches spreading or slightly drooping. Alternate on the twigs, the leaves are long-pointed and coarse-toothed with mostly uneven bases. They are rough on the surface, over four inches long, and have teeth on most of the margin. In early fall, the leaves are often covered with large, pimple-like galls caused by tiny jumping plant lice. In early spring, very small, yellowish-green flowers appear in small clusters, followed by small, orange to purple fruit on stalks at the leaf bases.

Common Hackberry grows in moist soils, usually along streams, and ranges from Canada south to Virginia and west to Oklahoma. The tree grows in most counties in Virginia. Flowers April-May; fruits October-November.

The common name apparently was derived from "hagberry," meaning "marsh berry," a name used in Scotland for a cherry. The wood is similar to ash and is used for fencing and cheap furniture. Branches of this and other hackberries may become deformed by bushy growths called witches'-brooms, produced by mites and fungi. Fruits ("sugarberries") are eaten by many birds, including bobwhite quail, pheasant, woodpeckers, and wild turkey. Common Hackberry is a larval host for five species of butterflies, including Mourning Cloak. ❖

Photo: Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Splitbeard Bluestem

Andropogon ternarius

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Description. This is a distinctive grass in the fall with paired, silvery-white seed tufts at the ends of the stems. The fluffy seed heads catch the sun and often persist into winter. Growing in clumps, Splitbeard Bluestem has 1-4 foot stems. Narrow, ribbon-like leaves toward the base of the plant are glaucous and blue-green in the summer, turning copper, red and bronze in the fall. The flowers start to appear in late summer and are in full bloom in October.

Habitat. Preferring hot dry sites with poor soil but good drainage, Splitbeard Bluestem grows in southeastern counties of Virginia. This plant is common in dry places, thin woods, pinelands, old fields, meadows and roadsides, throughout southeastern U.S. from Delaware to Kentucky and southern Missouri, and south to Florida and Texas.

Comments. This is a stunning grass for a meadow or wildflower border with the sun back-lighting masses of the V-shaped seed tufts. Juncos and chipping sparrows eat the seeds. Splitbeard Bluestem is a host plant for the Wood Nymph butterfly, whose caterpillars feed on the foliage. ❖

Photo: Splitbeard Bluestem *(Andropogon ternarius)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2013
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

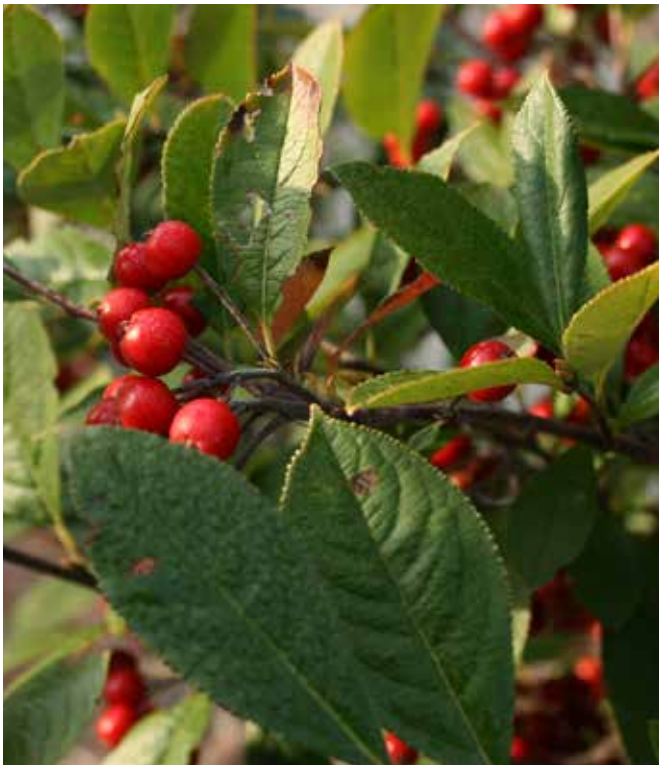
Red Chokeberry

Aronia arbutifolia

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

This native deciduous shrub of the Rose Family is truly a four-season plant. In the spring clusters of flowers with 5 petals and about 20 stamens appear, borne on hairy stalks. After the flowers, abundant glossy red fruits are densely crowded along the branches. The fruits ripen in late summer and persist throughout fall and into winter. With a low protein content, they are usually overlooked by birds until the end of the season when other foods are unavailable. Leaves are glossy and dark green, to 3 inches long, minutely toothed on the margins and fuzzy, grayish-green beneath. The foliage turns bright red in autumn, similar to that of burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*).

Red Chokeberry is easily grown in average, well-drained soils in full sun to part shade, with best fruit production in full sun. It is multi-stemmed, and will form small colonies from rhizomes. The plant will tolerate a range of conditions including boggy soils. Growing in thickets, bogs, swamps and wet woods, it occurs in every county in Virginia. The range is from Newfoundland to Florida and Texas, especially on and near the Coastal Plain, but also in the mountains, to Kentucky and West Virginia.



Blooms March-May; fruits September-November.

Although the fruits can make tasty jams and jellies, this plant is known as "Chokeberry" because the berries are tart, bitter, and very astringent, causing choking if eaten. (Choke Cherry [*Prunus virginiana*] is a common, true cherry with stone fruits.) Red Chokeberry also appears in references as: *Pyrus arbutifolia* or *Photinia pyrifolia,* emphasizing its close relationship with Wild Crabapples (*Pyrus*) or as *Sorbus arbutifolia*, to the Mountain-ashes. ❖

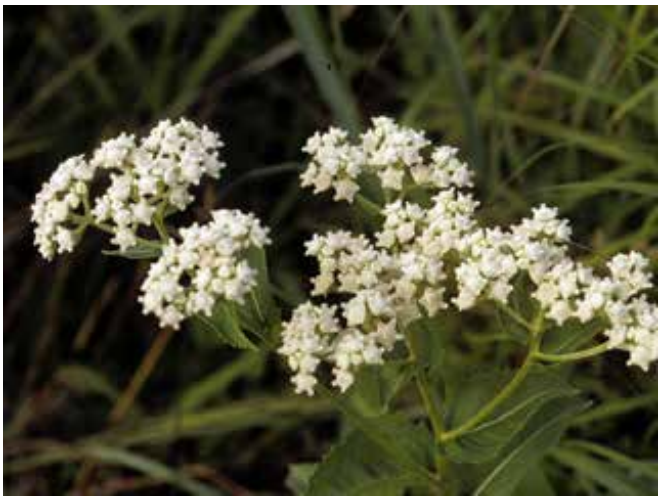
Photo: Red Chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wild Quinine, American Feverfew

Parthenium integrifolium

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

In the home garden, wild quinine looks best in a native or cottage garden or as part of a naturalized meadow. The plant grows 3-4 feet tall in clumps, and is topped with woollylooking, white flower heads, each with tiny ray flowers from late spring to late summer. The blossoms make nice indoor flower arrangements. The leaves are aromatic, coarsely toothed and rough.



The plant is easily grown in average, dry to medium, well-drained soil in full sun. Wild Quinine is native to all regions of Virginia with the exception of the far southwest. The plant grows naturally in prairies and dry woods from Virginia to Minnesota and south to Georgia and Arkansas.

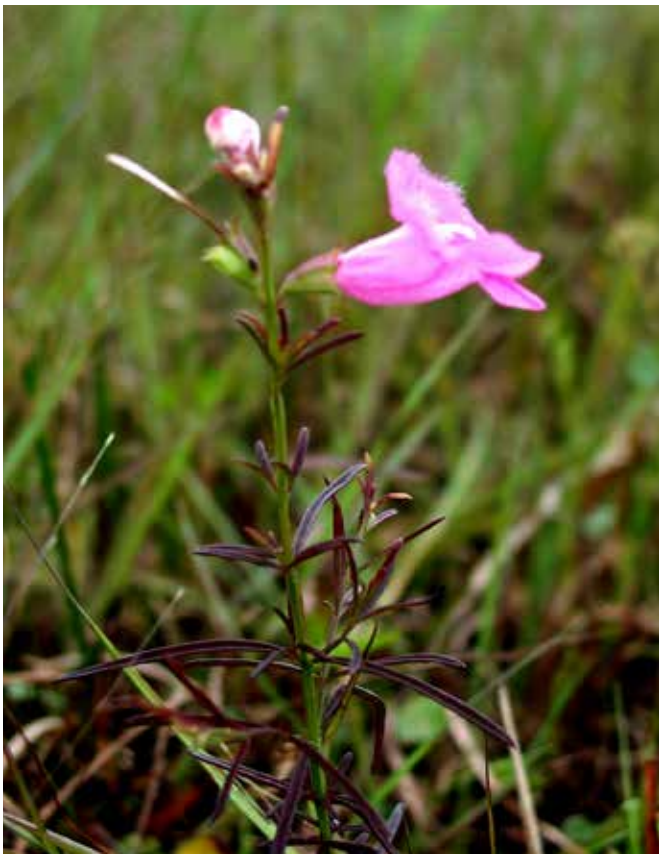
The flowering tops were once used for "intermittent fevers" like malaria, hence the common name of Wild Quinine. The root was used as a diuretic for kidney and bladder problems and gonorrhea. One study suggests wild Quinine may stimulate the immune system. Since the root strongly resembles that of Pale Purple Coneflower (*Echinacea pallida*), it is a common addition to extracts of Purple Coneflower (*E. purpurea*), historically and in modern times.❖

Wildflower Spot – October 2015
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Purple False Foxglove

Agalinis purpurea

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*



These rose-purple tubular flowers grow along shores and salt marshes, from early to late fall, August through October. Purple False Foxglove is a sprawling annual about 3 feet tall, carrying very narrow leaves with smooth edges, mostly opposite on somewhat wiry stems. An inch or more long, the bell-shaped flowers have yellow lines and purple spots within and open out into 5 rounded lobes. The flowers are followed by rounded capsules which split, releasing numerous tiny seeds into the wind.

Preferring sunny areas, these plants occur in swamps and marshes, wet to moist open habitats, including old fields, clearings and roadsides. They are found in eastern and central U.S. and Canada, and throughout Virginia. Salt Marsh False Foxglove *(A. maritima)* is a similar species with flowers half as large and fleshy leaves. Occurring only in the coastal counties of Virginia, this plant is common in salt meadows with Saltmeadow Cordgrass (*Spartina patens)* and Saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata)*.

While the narrow leaves photosynthesize, these false foxgloves are considered partial plant parasites. Their fibrous roots establish a connection with those of a host plant, usually a grass. Using specialized roots called haustoria, sugars and proteins are transferred from the host plant.

Purple False Foxglove is host to the Common Buckeye butterfly, as the caterpillars feed on the foliage. The tubular flowers attract bumblebees and other long-tongued bees that visit the flowers for nectar and pollen.

Other false foxgloves have yellow flowers, and are classified in the genus *Aureolaria.* Both *Agalinis* and *Aureolaria* were formerly included in genus *Gerardia*. Purple Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*) is not native to this country, but is widely sold in nurseries and grown as an ornamental plant in home gardens. The flowers of all these plants show similar characteristics. ❖

Photo: Purple False Foxglove (*Agalinis purpurea*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2016
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Maryland Golden-aster

Chrysopsis mariana

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Maryland Golden-aster is a beautiful addition to the fall garden where most of the flowers are pink and blue asters. A really long bloomer, the golden-yellow daisy-like flowers, about an inch across, first appear in June and continue until the end of October. This native perennial grows no more than 12-16 inches tall in neat, non-spreading clumps.

The stems and leaves are cobwebby-hairy early, but later become smooth. The leaves at the bottom of the plant are long and lance-shaped, and shorter on the rest of the stem. There is a whitened midline on the top surface of the leaves, which distinguishes this species from other look-alikes.

This native perennial grows well in full sun with dry, poor soil and tolerates light shade. Found in every county in Virginia, it is drought tolerant and easy to grow. The range is from southern New York to Ohio and eastern Kentucky, and south to Florida and Texas.

The genus name is composed of the Greek chrysos, "gold", and opsis, "aspect", from the golden flowers. Maryland Golden-aster is not classified as a true aster because its ray flowers are yellow, rather than white, pink, blue, or purple like members of the genera of true asters e.g., *Symphyotrichum, Eurybia,* and others. ❖

Photo: Maryland Golden-aster (*Chrysopsis mariana*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Switchgrass

Panicum spp.

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

These native clump-forming grasses are in full bloom in October, with showy loose flower clusters. Like all grasses, they are deer resistant. Switchgrass was one of the dominant species of the tallgrass prairie that once blanketed the middle of the continent. As such, this North American native is extremely easy to grow and is well adapted to the vagaries of our climate, tolerating both wet and dry sites. Switchgrass will withstand poor drainage and flooding, so it makes a great erosion control, and can tolerate salt spray.

Growing 3 to 7 feet tall in narrow, erect clumps, these sturdy plants can screen undesirable views. They also add rich, long-lasting fall color and winter interest to perennial borders. This grass is simply magnificent in the fall after a touch of frost, and the seedheads make great additions to dried bouquets.

Many cultivars can be found in local nurseries. The shortest and most colorful is the 3-foot tall 'Shenandoah' with reddish leaves and stems; other red cultivars have originated in Germany, with foliage from orange-red to deep burgundy.

'Heavy Metal" grows in a straight stunning column of metallic blue foliage and yellow fall color, maintaining its form all winter. The seedheads of 'Dallis Blue' are a feathery, powder blue that is stunning against a pine woodlands or a white fence.

As a perennial, when switchgrasses are planted in the fall, they can make root growth over the winter, and form nice growth the first year. Subsequent years will see an increase in the height and width of the plant. In March when the new growth appears, the tan stems and leaves can be cut off, and left as mulch around the plant. ❖

Photo: Switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Crownbeard

Verbesina occidentalis

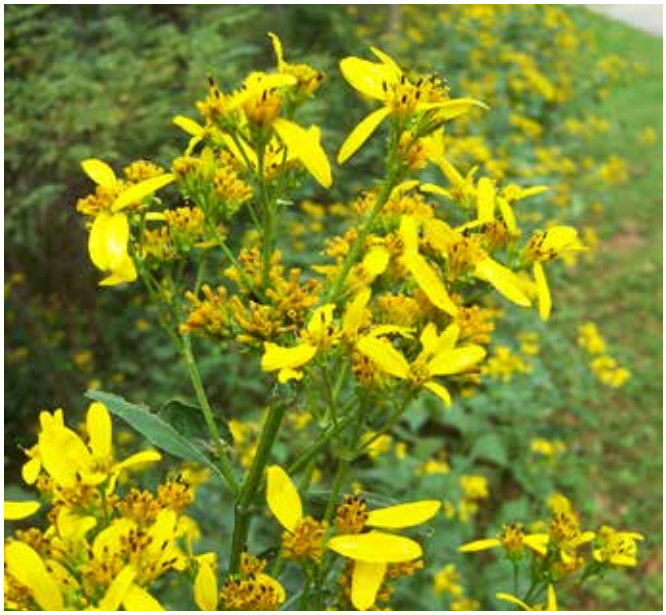
By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

The flowers of Crownbeard consist of only a few golden-yellow rays, often bent backward from a mop-like center of small yellow disk flowers, giving the cluster an unkempt, ragged appearance. But the flowering is prolific, at the top of 6-foot stems and the plants grow in drifts, very visible in the fall.

Crownbeard prefers full sun and moist soil, growing throughout southeastern U.S. and most counties in Virginia. The plant self-seeds and spreads from a large perennial crown that will produce many new plants. It is seen often along roadsides, meadows and old fields.

This is a long-blooming native perennial, producing flowers from August through October. Harmless soldier beetles love this plant, busily mating and eating at the same time. The nectar feeds butterflies and other insects that are storing nutrients for winter.

Wingstem (*Verbesina alternifolia*) is a close relative with similar flowers but has a few more petals. It grows in wetter conditions throughout Virginia but is not often seen in the Coastal Plain. Both plants have winged stems that are actually extended petioles. These two plants can be distinguished because the leaves of Crownbeard grow opposite on the stem, and those of Wingstem are alternate. The species name of



Wingstem "alternifolia" describes the alternate leaves.

Another relative is Frostweed (*Verbesina virginica*) with clusters of white flowers. This plant is native to southern U.S. to Texas, but in Virginia Frostweed in found in only a few coastal counties. ❖

Photo: Crownbeard *(Verbesina occidentalis)* taken by Phillip Merritt and Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2019
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Obedient Plant

Physostegia virginiana

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Obedient Plant produces spikes of rose-pink flowers that are striking against yellow goldenrods and the white asters of early fall. Although the flowers look like little snapdragons, the square stems identify this plant as a member of the mint family, and deer do not eat them.

The bud at the top continues to produce new blooms -- "indeterminate florescence" as botanists call this pattern of floral production when the youngest flowers are at the top of the stem.

The common name is well deserved -- when a blossom is pushed right or left it stays that way, because of friction between the flower stalk and the surrounding bracts. Children are amused by this seeming power over a flower. In nature this ability allows the blossoms to face away from a storm, providing an advantage for pollination since insects land against the wind.

The tubular flowers attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Each flower has five triangular lobes, two forming an upper lip and three as the lower lip. The flowers have open mouths that show guidelines of dots and fine lines for bees and butterflies to follow as they seek food. Bumblebees are the major pollinators and can often be seen attached to the underlip when the weather is cold, or in the evening. Painted Lady butterflies have been seen on the flowers in late October. Obedient Plant flowers are long-bloomers, from August through November.

This plant can be aggressive – it spreads by long stems, either above ground (stolons) or below (rhizomes), and self-seeds. But the young seedlings can be pulled easily if they grow where unwanted. The leaves are distinctive, opposite and sessile on the stem, lance-shaped with widely-spaced teeth that have sharp points – few plants have this appearance.

This native wildflower is easy to grow, in sun, shade or part shade and soils that are somewhat moist. To control the height of the 4-foot stems, they can be cut by 1/3 early in the season, and pruning will control a tendency to droop. The plant can tolerate both poor drainage and drought but grows best in full sun with humus-rich soils.

Obedient Plant grows naturally in many counties across Virginia, and ranges over eastern U.S. and Canada, but is rare as a native occurrence in eastern Virginia. Another species, Swamp Obedient Plant (P. leptophylla) reaches only as far north as southernmost Virginia where it inhabits swamps and fresh to slightly brackish marshes.

A cultivar 'Alba' has white flowers and there is a variegated, pink-flowered form. Other forms are available in various shades of pink and rose, some growing less aggressively than the native species. ❖

Photo: Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – October 2020
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

Great Blue Lobelia

Lobelia siphilitica

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

A lovely plant late in the growing season, when plants with yellow flowers are usually prominent. Tall spikes of brilliant true-blue flowers grow on a stiff, unbranched, leafy stalk, 1-3 feet high. Flowers of this genus all have 2 narrow lobes or "ears" above, with 3 wider lobes forming a lip below. The 1-inch long violet-blue flowers of Great Blue Lobelia are striped with white on the 3 lower lobes, which appear more prominent than the lobes above. Leaves are alternate on the stem, finely toothed and pointed.

Great Blue Lobelia is a wetland native species, requiring wet to moist soil, fertile and loamy. The plant requires little maintenance, growing in part shade, but in full sun the soil must be consistently moist, as in rain gardens. The natural habitat is meadows, moist thickets and swamps from Maine to Manitoba and Colorado, south to North Carolina and Texas. While found in most counties of Virginia, it is infrequent in the Coastal Plain.

This clump-forming perennial has a long blooming period, from July through October. Also known as Blue Cardinal Flower, this plant tolerates conditions that are drier than those of the red species. This plant is a member of the Bellflower Family, the name suggesting a rounded corolla with a long neck. Bumblebees can access the nectar at the bottom of the tube-shaped flower while collecting pollen.

While the seeds are too small to be of use to wildlife, Great Blue Lobelia self-seeds and is easy to grow from seeds collected in the fall. Or by division -- the roots make offshoots that can be separated from the main plant in fall or spring. Making cuttings from stems with two nodes is another method of growing more of these plants.

Other Lobelia species native to the Coastal Plain have much smaller flowers. Indian Tobacco *L. inflata* has been reported in every county of Virginia, growing in woodlands, roadsides, fields and wetlands. Nuttall's Lobelia *L. nuttallii* is frequent in wet areas and roadsides. Downy Lobelia *L. puberula* is in every county other than those in the far northwestern area. Other species and cultivars are available in the nursery trade.

Early medical writers thought American Indians used the root primarily to treat syphilis, hence the species name *siphilitica.* While potentially poisonous, the American Indians used root tea for syphilis, and leaf tea for a number of illnesses, such as colds, worms, nosebleeds, coughs and headaches. ❖

Great Blue Lobelia

Indian Tobacco

Photo: Great Blue Lobelia *(Lobelia siphilitica)* taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Downy Lobelia: An Overlooked Garden Native

By Betsy Washington

Several of our native Lobelias are well loved and absolutely beautiful. Cardinal Flower with its brilliant red flower spikes, and Great Blue Lobelia with its crowded spires of deep blue flowers, are familiar to many gardeners. Downy Lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*), which is less well-known, graces roadside ditches, low and upland woods, riverbanks and other boggy or damp areas. In fact, Downy Lobelia is the most common blue Lobelia on the coastal plain and throughout the Southeast U.S. All three of these Lobelias are wonderful garden additions that attract numerous pollinators to their tubular flowers, including many showy butterflies and hummingbirds.

As you might expect, the stems and leaves of Downy Lobelia are covered in soft, short downy hairs. Its spires of soft lavender to blue flowers atop 3 – 5' tall stems are less crowded than those of its Great Blue "cousin," giving Downy Lobelia the elegant, "refined" look of some lavender bellflowers so admired in English gardens. Each flower has two flaring lips, of which the upper has two lobes and the lower lip has three, with a single white spot at its base. Downy Lobelia blooms from late July into November, but typically peaks in late August to early October.

An overlooked garden plant that is much tougher than it looks, Downy Lobelia prefers consistently moist soils but tolerates those that are occasionally wet and even dry soils. It is easy to grow in sun or part shade, and is at home in a soils ranging from our frequently sandy, to loam and clay.

A Painted Lady butterfly pollinates the blossoms of a Downy Lobelia (*Lobelia puberula*). Photo by Betsy Washington

Like other Lobelias, Downy Lobelia is often considered a short-lived perennial, but produces lots of tiny seeds that will keep the population "blossoming" if the ground is not mulched heavily. Gently raking around the base of the plant each fall will encourage new seedlings. Downy Lobelia is even deer resistant.

Often it is found in the wild growing with Joe-pye-weeds, Mistflower, and Goldenrods. Planting them together will create a stunning late summer-fall vignette. For even more stunning colors, add Cardinal Flower and Great Blue Lobelia.

Editor's Note: This article first appeared as the Plant of the Month for August 2019 on the blog of the Northern Neck Chapter of VPNS.
