

BLAZING STAR, GAYFEATHER

Liatris SPP.

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

Blazing Star is a tall and stately plant for bed or border, attractive to the three B's: birds, butterflies (especially swallowtails), and bees. The flowers, unlike most plants, bloom from the top down. Usually growing 1-2 feet tall, some species and cultivars reach 5 feet. The tubular florets range from pink-purple to white; stems are covered with narrow, thin leaves.

Remember to provide full sun and well-drained garden soil; Blazing Star cannot adapt to wet earth. Blooming in summer to early autumn, these plants look fantastic combined with Butterfly weed or Orange Milkweed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) and ornamental grasses. Cultivars available in nurseries usually bloom in midsummer.

In sandy soils of dry, open woods, especially among pines, you will find Grass-leaved Blazing Star (*Liatris graminifolia*). It is the only species of blazing star known to occur natively on the Middle Neck and the Peninsula. Give it rich organic matter and too much water, and its upright posture becomes floppy. Sessile Blazing Star (*L. spicata*) grows in wet meadows and other moist habitats in counties south of the James River. ❖



Wildflower Spot – July 2008

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SWAMP MILKWEED

Asclepias incarnata

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

These deep pink flowers in wide clusters on five-foot stems are magnets to butterflies, which find their faint vanilla scent irresistible. Swamp milkweed is one of the best attractors of the Monarch butterfly which feeds on the flowers and lays its eggs on the plants. The long and narrow opposite leaves provide a ready food source for the caterpillars. After a long blooming period, from June through August, upright thin pods are produced which split open in the fall, releasing seeds attached to silky hairs that act as parachutes to carry the seeds on the currents of the wind.

Unlike other members of the milkweed group, this species does not have milky sap. They have specialized roots for living in heavy wet soils, and the thick white roots are adapted to live in environments low in oxygen. Swamp milkweed prefers moist open areas and is typically found growing wild near the edges of ponds, lakes, open ditches and low areas.

The plant is found in every county in Virginia, growing easily in full sun and moist soil in local gardens. Use swamp milkweed at the back of perennial borders, and along pond and stream banks. A number of cultivars are available in



colors from white, soft pink-purple to dark purple. The flowers can be cut for a long-lasting display in the home, and the seedpods can be used for winter arrangements.

On an expedition to Utah in 1850, a traveler reported that the Pueblo Indians rub the stems to separate the fibers, to make beautiful and very strong fishing lines and fine sewing thread. A decoction was used for various medicinal purposes. Although American colonists used swamp milkweed for asthma, rheumatism, worms, and as a heart tonic, the plant is potentially toxic. ❖

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

SUMMER PHLOX

Phlox paniculata

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

A very reliable summer to fall garden plant, summer phlox grows 1-3 feet tall in sun or shade, preferring moist, acid, rich soil although limy soil is OK. The middle leaves are widest near the center, with prominent side veins, broadly lance-shaped. Flowers are grouped at the tips of erect stems; magenta-pink in the wild, many cultivars are available in shades from pink to deep purple.

No other plant has such a long blooming season, from July through October; summer phlox tolerates seasonal flooding, and blooms vigorously during the hottest part of the summer. If the faded flowers are removed, reblooming will occur; the plant easily self-seeds when seeds are developed. It can be scattered in a woodland garden with only two to three hours of bright dappled sun and can be grown under black walnut trees. Summer phlox looks wonderful planted with spiderwort, beebalm, blackeyed susan, wild ageratum, obedient plant, and swamp sunflower. Butterflies and hummingbirds love to sip nectar from flowers.

Summer phlox can be seen in streambanks, roadsides, rich, open woods, and thickets -- in Virginia, in coastal and northern counties, and scattered in the mountainous regions. Common in eastern and central U.S., the plant's range is from southern New York to northern Georgia and to the Midwest.

The plant has been widely used as a medicinal herb; the leaf extract is used as a laxative and for treating boils. ❖



Photo: Pink summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) taken by Jan Newton
White summer phlox (*Phlox paniculata*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

FLOWERING SPURGE

Euphorbia corollata

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

Flowering Spurge is distinctive with a whorl of bright green leaves surrounding the stem where several flowering stalks branch off. The stems grow erect to 3 feet, forming large, loose, long-lasting, flat-topped clusters of flowers. What appears to be a single flower with five white petals is actually a cluster of flowers with one pistillate flower (which consists solely of one stalked ovary) and several staminate flowers (each of which consists solely of one stamen). The five white “petals” are lobes on the margin of the cup that contains the cluster of unisexual flowers.

The linear leaves are hairless, 2-3 inches long and ½ inch wide with smooth margins. They occur along the stem alternately except at the top of the plant where the leaves form whorls of three beneath the flowers. When broken, the stems produce a milky sap.

Preferring full sun, this plant will tolerate almost any kind of soil, and poor soil is actually preferred because of the reduction in competition from other plants. Flowering Spurge is drought resistant and not subject to diseases.

This native perennial grows in dry fields and open woods, and is abundant in western prairies. Found in every county in Virginia,



the plant ranges from Massachusetts and New Hampshire to Minnesota, and south to Florida and Texas, blooming from June through October.

The flowers attract wasps, flies, and bees. Ants may help distribute some of the seeds because of a small edible appendage at their base. Each flower produces 3 seeds which are usually ejected mechanically. The seeds are popular with wild turkey, bobwhite and mourning dove. Flowering Spurge is rarely eaten by mammalian herbivores because of the toxic white latex in the leaves and stems, which can kill cattle. The common name “spurge” comes from the Latin expurgare (to purge) – the plant has been used as a strong laxative but large doses can be poisonous. The milky sap may cause blistering on the skin. ❖

Wildflower Spot – July 2011

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

HORSEMINT

Monarda punctata

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

This unusual native plant has head-like whorls of yellowish, purple-spotted, tubular flowers occurring in clusters along the stem to form an elongated spike, or from the leaf axils. Each whorl is surrounded with showy whitish, purple-tinged, leaf-like bracts at its base. The aromatic flowers attract butterflies. Leaves are lance-shaped with shallow teeth.

Provided with full sun in well-drained, sandy soil of average fertility, this plant blooms

profusely for several weeks in mid-summer. Because they grow about three feet tall, horsemint makes an excellent addition to the rear of a perennial border, either formal or wild.

Horsemint grows in coastal and central counties of Virginia in dry fields and along roadsides. The plant can be found from Vermont to southeast Minnesota and south to Florida and Texas.

Linnaeus named the genus *Monarda* in honor of a 16th century Spanish physician and botanist, Nicolas Bautista Monardes (1493-1588). Monardes never went to the Americas but was able to study medicinal plants in Spain because Spain controlled navigation and commerce from the New World.



The fresh leaves have been used medicinally as a tea. Historically, doctors used this mint for various illnesses. The oil is high in thymol and has been used as an antiseptic. Thymol was once commercially derived from thyme (*Thymus* species), but during World War I when commercial fields were destroyed in Europe, horsemint was grown in the U.S. as a substitute source of thymol. ❖

Photo: Horsemint (*Monarda punctata*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

BUTTERFLY PEA

Clitoria mariana

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

Blooming June through July, Butterfly Pea has beautiful, 2" long flowers, mostly solitary, and pale blue-lilac with darker veins. The stems are twining, bearing compound leaves with 3 broadly lance-shaped leaflets. This species is easily confused with *Centrosema virginianum* which has a calyx (tube around the base of the flower) of slender lobes, not short teeth.

This plant prefers acidic soils in wooded areas and clearings and is drought tolerant. Growing in almost every county in Virginia, Butterfly Pea ranges from New Jersey west to Missouri and Oklahoma and south to Florida and Texas.

The shape of the flowers has inspired the name of this genus. Different species of *Clitoria*

have been used to enhance fertility, to control menstrual discharge, to treat gonorrhoea, and as a sexual stimulant. Users of the plant as folk medicine may follow an ancient principle called the Doctrine of Signatures, a belief that plant structures that resemble portions of the human body indicate their ability to provide remedies for those body parts. ❖



Wildflower Spot – July 2013

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

SEA OXEYE

Borrichia frutescens

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

Sea Oxeye is a low-growing, little-branched deciduous shrub, up to 2 feet tall, typically forming dense stands. Both the stem and leaves are grayish-hairy, and the oblong, opposite, fleshy leaves have sharp-pointed tips and tapering bases. This plant reproduces by underground stems (rhizomes) and seeds. Large flowers, to over one-inch wide, have yellow daisy-like rays and brownish-yellow disc flowers. Hard, sharp, erect spines surround the compact flowering heads at the tips of the branches. The seeds are four-sided, black nutlets.

Blooming from May through September, Sea Oxeye has been reported in only ten coastal counties in Virginia. It occurs in seacoasts, especially in salt marshes, from District of Columbia to Florida, Texas, Mexico and Bermuda. The plant grows in full sun, tolerating extended flooding, acid or alkaline soils, sandy or loamy.

Many butterfly species are attracted to the flowers, among them is the Salt Marsh Skipper butterfly. The genus name honors Ole Borrich, a 17th century Danish botanist. *Frutescens* means “shrubby.” ❖



Photo: Sea Oxeye (*Borrichia frutescens*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – July 2014

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

AMERICAN GERMANDER

Teucrium canadense

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

This native mint has the typical square stem and aromatic leaves. Lavender-pink flowers are in terminal spike-like clusters; each flower as a long, flattened lower lip, a good landing platform for pollinating insects. The plant grows 3 feet tall on stiff stems, producing a good-sized clump of leaves, which are opposite each other on the stem, and pointed. The stem and undersides of leaves are often silvery and somewhat hairy.

While the flowers have no scent, the leaves are bitter-tasting and most mammals will avoid them. In the home garden this plant could be used in a border to discourage browsing deer. But like many mints, the plant spreads by rhizomes and can become weedy if not controlled.

American Germander is common throughout our area, growing in moist thickets, shores, salt marshes and disturbed areas. The range extends throughout most of the U.S. and southern Canada. Flowers bloom from June through August.

The most important pollinators are bees with long tongues, such as bumblebees, miner bees, leaf-cutting bees. Hummingbirds and hummingbird moths also seek nectar from these tubular flowers.

The genus name is derived from *teucrion*, a name used by Dioscorides for some related plant. The common name *germander* was originally altered from a Greek name for ground oak, *chamaidrys*. Leaf tea from this plant has been used traditionally to induce menstruation, urination, and sweating, and also as an antiseptic dressing. ❖



Photo: American Germander (*Teucrium canadense*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – July 2015

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

HORSEWEED

Conyza canadensis

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

The common name may refer to the size of this plant, a robust, coarse summer annual in the Aster Family. Horseweed grows 1 to 6 feet tall on a stout stem often covered with long white hairs. There are a lot of narrow leaves crowded on the stem, which becomes branched near the top. These flowering branches have many small flower heads, each one with a yellow disk packed with 12-25 florets. The petals (rays) are tiny, less than 1 mm. long, white and inconspicuous. The reproductive flowers are in the central disk, a common pattern with asters. In early fall the flowers are replaced with seeds (achenes) covered with fine bristles, which are carried by air to new locations.

A very similar plant is Fireweed (*Erechtites*) but the leaves of Fireweed are larger, with teeth on the edges, and scattered alternately on the stem.

Horseweed grows rapidly in the summer and has a

long blooming period, from July through November. The plant thrives on bare soil, will grow on many soils, including those with clay and gravel, and can survive drought. Growing in roadsides, old fields, and disturbed ground, it is found all over North America and in every county in Virginia. First listed in North America in 1640, it was in France 13 years later, perhaps from seeds carried on beaver pelts exported from Canada.

Native Americans and early settlers used a tea from the leaves to treat dysentery and sore throat. Young leafy seedlings and young leaves can be eaten after boiling, and the dried leaves have a flavor similar to that of tarragon. Many

herbal uses have been found for this plant. Essential oil from the leaves has been used to stop bleeding, as an astringent to dry mucous membranes and to flavor candy, condiments and soda.

Deer don't eat Horseweed because the leaves contain a turpentine-like substance that is resinous and bitter to the taste. The foliage can irritate the skin of some people, and the noses of horses that try to feed on it. The flowers are attractive to insect pollinators, including flies and many species of bees. ❖



Photo: Horseweed (*Conyza canadensis*) taken by Phillip Merritt
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

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

LEAFCUP

Smallanthus uvedalia (*Polymnia uvedalia*)

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

This is a large, coarse plant growing 3-10 feet tall on stems that are often hairy. Huge leaves, to over a foot long, are cut into several lobes and somewhat resemble the foot of a bear, suggesting the other common name “Bearsfoot.” The plant is usually known as “Leafcup” because the leaves are arranged in pairs on the stems, and the petiole of each leaf is winged, forming a small cup around the stem.



Each plant is covered with yellow flowers, 1-3 inches across, visited by many butterflies, bees, wasps, and other insects. Leafcup is a member of the Aster Family, with tiny flowers crowded into the central disk, surrounded by yellow rays. Aster flowers are complex – the anthers (male reproductive part) are packed into a cylinder and as they mature, the pistil (female reproductive part) is pushed up through the cylinder, presenting pollen grains to insects seeking nectar. After a few days, when the pollen grains are no longer viable, the stigma opens and becomes receptive to the pollen deposited by other visiting insects. The large seeds resulting from fertilization are food for many species of birds.

Leafcup is native to nearly every county in Virginia, and ranges from New York to Illinois and Missouri, south to Florida and Texas. This large perennial grows best in part shade, in soil that remains moist in the summer. It can be seen in native woodlands at the edge of forest, in shade filtered by the leaves of the forest trees. Because of its size, this plant is suitable for the back of a perennial border, or edges of woods.

Native Americans used extracts of the root of Bearsfoot as a stimulant and laxative. Physicians in the late 1800’s recommended its use in ointments for ailments such as rheumatism, swellings, fevers, burns, cuts and local inflammations. ❖

Photo: Leafcup (*Smallanthus uvedalia*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.

Wildflower Spot – July 2017

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

YELLOW WILD INDIGO

Baptisia tinctoria

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

Bright yellow pea-shaped flowers cover this shrubby wildflower from April through August. The mound of foliage grows 2-3 feet tall on many-branched stems carrying silvery green 3-parted leaves. After the flowers fade they are replaced by inflated seedpods that are attractive in indoor arrangements.

Yellow Wild Indigo is easy to grow in average, well-drained soil, in full sun or light shade. Young plants may not flower vigorously since they expend much energy developing strong taproots. During the third year the upper half of the plant will produce more blossoms. Most native plants do not show good development for three years: “first they sleep, then they creep, then they leap.” Once established, Yellow Wild Indigo is a durable and long-lived perennial and will

tolerate drought and poor soils. Found in every county in Virginia, the range extends from southern Maine to Georgia and Tennessee.

The showy flowers attract butterflies and other pollinators, and the leaves host the caterpillars of the Wild Indigo Duskywing and Silver-spotted Skipper. The foliage is pest resistant, and distasteful to deer and rabbits. Yellow Wild Indigo is a member of the Pea Family, and as a legume, the roots contain bacteria that fix



nitrogen, enriching the soils where they grow. This is a good choice for a wildlife or cottage garden or a dry meadow. The yellow flowers look wonderful when planted with orange Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), and purple and white asters.

Native Americans used the plant for various medicinal purposes; studies have shown the extract stimulates the immune system. Yellow Wild Indigo was used by early

Americans as a substitute for true indigo (genus *Indigofera*) in making dyes. *Baptisia* comes from the Greek word for “dye” and *tinctoria* is derived from the Latin word for “dye.” ❖

Photo: Yellow Wild Indigo (*Baptisia tinctoria*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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Wildflower Spot – July 2018

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

ELDERBERRY

Sambucus canadensis

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

This is a large, sprawling shrub growing 5-12 feet tall, one of the first to leaf out in the spring. Elderberry can be a showy ornamental for the garden, producing attractive flowers and berries all season long. It will tolerate a wide range of soils, but prefers moist, organic soils in full sun to part shade. The yellow compound leaves turn golden in the fall, if planted in full sun.

This native shrub can spread aggressively by root suckers, forming thickets, so it is best massed in naturalized areas or in shrub

borders, roadside plantings, or as a screen, particularly in wet or low areas. Heavy pruning periodically will help control its growth. Elderberry is found in all counties of Virginia and is native throughout eastern U.S. and south to Mexico.

Large, flat-topped clusters of fragrant, star-shaped white flowers appear in June through July and are followed by clusters of reddish-purple to black, berry-like fruits (drupes) in late summer to fall. The flowers furnish nectar and pollen to insects in the spring and in the fall over 43 species of birds enjoy the fruits. This is a highly desirable plant for wildlife, and it is moderately resistant to damage by deer.

In West Virginia, concentrated fruit syrup is made as a wintertime remedy for colds and flu; studies have shown its effectiveness for treatment of colds and flu. While the bark, root, leaves and unripe berries are toxic, the fruits are edible when cooked, and may be used to make preserves, jellies, pies and wine. The flowers, not toxic, can be eaten in pancakes and fritters, and elderberry juice is a nice cold drink. ❖



Photo: Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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Wildflower Spot – July 2019

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

EASTERN REDBUD

Cercis canadensis

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

Those showy pink-magenta blossoms along the roadsides are one of the sure signs of spring. Now at the start of summer, the flowers have been replaced by bean-like seed pods that stay on the tree throughout the winter.

Eastern redbud is a strikingly conspicuous tree in the spring because it flowers before



other tree leaves form. Pollination is usually accomplished by long-tongued bees. Two or three weeks later, the flowers drop off and smooth, heart-shaped leaves appear, which are eaten by the caterpillars of some species of moths and butterflies.

Typically, redbud is a small tree 15-30 ft. tall, growing best on moist, well-drained sites. It does not transplant well and should be installed in new sites when young. This tree works well in naturalized settings or as a lawn tree. Disease and insect pests can be avoided by regular watering and fertilization and by pruning out dead branches as needed.

Eastern redbud grows in rich woods throughout eastern U.S. and Canada and is found in nearly every county in Virginia.

The flower bud, flowers and young pods are edible, added to salads or cooked as a vegetable. Widely planted as an ornamental, redbud wood is heavy, hard, and close-grained, but because of the small size and zigzag branching, it is of no commercial value as a source of lumber.

The genus name “Cercis” comes from a Greek work that refers to a weaver’s shuttle since each seed pod resembles the shuttle used by weavers. The species name indicates Canada as part of this tree’s native range. ❖

Photo: Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) taken by Helen Hamilton
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Wildflower Spot – July 2020

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

MOUNTAIN-MINTS

Pycnanthemum tenuifolium/muticum

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

What's not to like about a native perennial that is attractive to bees and butterflies, does not spread aggressively, and is deer-resistant? Mountain-mints bloom from June through August, with small white flowers rich in nectar that is food for many kinds of insects – butterflies, skippers, bees, beetles, flies and especially wasps. Flowers are tightly clustered on the ends of stems and their structure allows wasps and other short-tongued insects to feed easily.

Two species are common in our area. With very narrow leaves, Slender Mountain-mint (*P. tenuifolium*) has a delicate, somewhat airy appearance. This native perennial plant grows 1-3 feet tall, branching frequently to create a bushy effect. The leaves are up to 3 inches long and ¼ inch across. Each leaf is hairless, with a prominent central vein and smooth margins. Small white to lavender 2-lipped flowers are in dense clusters in the leaf axils or at the ends of slender, hairless stems.

The dark green leaves of Clustered Mountain-mint (*P. muticum*) are not thin, up to 2 inches wide, and have a strong spearmint aroma when crushed. The flowers are similar the 2-lipped tubular flowers, each up to ½ inch wide, are in dense flat-topped clusters at the ends of the stems. Each cluster has a pair of showy silvery leaf-like bracts at the base. The entire plant looks like it has been dusted with powdery snow. Massed in groups, the effect is stunning – a clustered plant with tiny pinkish flowers buzzing with insects, surrounded by dark green leaves and snowy bracts.

Both Mountain-mints are easy to grow in the home garden, in full sun or part shade. Slender Mountain-mint prefers soils that are somewhat drier than the bogs and wet meadows where Clustered Mountain-mint occurs.

The flowers have no scent, but the leaves have a minty odor and taste. Deer usually don't browse on Mountain-mints because of the minty taste; the foliage may contain anti-bacterial substances that disrupt their digestive process. The tiny seeds are disseminated by wind – they are too small to be of much interest to birds.

The common name "Mountain-mint" does not refer to a preference for the mountainous regions. Both Mountain-mints are found in most counties of Virginia, and range over the eastern and central regions of the U.S. and Canada. The genus name derives from the Greek *pycnos* for "dense" and *antheon*, meaning "flower" and aptly describes the crowded flower clusters. The species name *tenuifolium* is derived from the Latin *tenuis*, meaning "thin," a reference to the narrow leaves. ❖



Photo: Mountain Mint (*Pycnanthemum tenuifolium*) taken by Helen Hamilton in York River State Park

For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.