Wild Ones

NATIVE PLANTS, NATURAL LANDSCAPES

SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA CHAPTER

September 2023 Newsletter

sepa.wildones.org

Visit us on Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram

September Meeting Highlights

Chapter Business

Elections for 2024 officers and board members will be held at our November 16 chapter meeting. If you are interested in serving as an officer (President, Vice President, Secretary, or Treasurer), committee chair (Membership, Publicity, Programs, or Community Projects), or member of the Board of Directors, please notify Susan at secretarywildonessepa@gmail.com.

Jessie Shiffler, who helped found the chapter in 2020 and has done an amazing job as President for the past 3 years, is stepping down in 2024, so we need someone to serve as **President**. The position of **Vice President** has been vacant this year, so we could really use a volunteer there as well.

Interested? Want to know what each office is about? Please contact Susan at secretarywildonessepa@gmail.com and ask for the summary of officer/board responsibilities.

The slate of nominees for officers and board members will be announced at our October 11 chapter meeting.

Our chapter gained 12 new members since our last meeting in May, for a total membership of 124.

Chapter Bylaws were approved unanimously by the board. Any member who would like a copy of the bylaws can contact the secretary at secretarywildonessepa@gmail.com.

Program -- No More Fall Cleanup

Neighbors may think you're crazy or just plain lazy, but the little guys know you're a real hero when you #LEAVE THE LEAVES xerces.org

Leaves are not litter -- they're food and shelter for butterflies, beetles, bees, moths, and more. The vast majority of insects overwinter in the same location where they spent the summer, but they're hidden and mostly inactive. Migratory insects, such as monarchs, are an exception. Most insects overwinter as adults or pupae, and they need a place that's protected from predators and weather fluctuations until spring. Many invertebrates rely on fallen leaves and other organic debris to cover and insulate them from winter's extremes.

Leafcutter bee nest cavity in hollow stem

Photo credit: Xerces.org

Tiger swallowtail butterfly chrysalis on tree branch.

Photo credit: Xerces.org

Resources

Leave the Leaves: Winter Habitat Protection

The First Thing We Do Let's Kill All the Leaf Blowers

Where Do Pollinators Go in Winter?

Nesting and Overwintering Habitat Fact Sheet

How To Create Habitat for Stem-Nesting Bees

A layer of fallen leaves several inches thick provides cover for many insects, from great spangled fritillary and wooly bear caterpillars to the eggs of stick insects. Luna moths and swallowtail butterflies disguise their cocoons and chrysalises as dried leaves.

Hollow stems of forbs provide cavities where insects can overwinter or nest. Brush piles and fallen tree limbs provide winter habitat. Almost one-third of native bee species nest in tiny spaces in dead wood, hollow stems, or brush piles. Some insects, like bumblebee queens, spend the winter months burrowed into the soil and benefit from a protective layer of fallen leaves.

Fallen leaves also prevent erosion and help the soil absorb rainwater. Rain runs off bare soil before it can soak in, carrying away valuable soil and causing stream sedimentation that damages habitat for fish, amphibians, and aquatic insects. Exposed soil is more prone to drought. A layer of fallen leaves and spent stems holds water long enough to allow it to soak deeply into the soil.

Avoid shredding leaves with a mower. Raking will keep leaves whole to protect overwintering insects, eggs, and cocoons. By spring, the leaves will have decomposed and enriched the soil.

Poster courtesy of Healthy Yards

Just because we're leaving the leaves and stems doesn't mean our properties will look messy. Leaves can be raked off lawns and into planting beds and under trees, where they will create habitat. Spent stems can be trimmed to half their height and the trimmed portion left on the ground so overwintering insects can emerge in the spring.

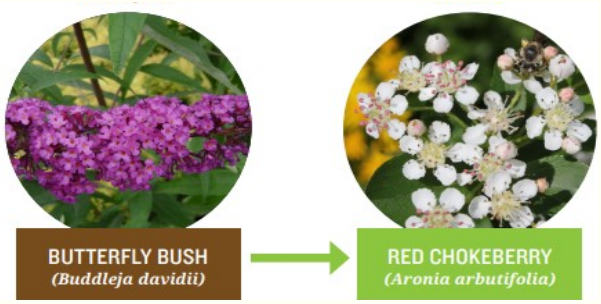
Lancaster Native Plant Alliance Handout

The Lancaster Native Plant Alliance, a chapter of the Pennsylvania Native Plant Society (PNPS), has collaborated with Lancaster Conservancy to develop an information sheet to present nurseries with facts about the economic and ecological value of native plants. There is a need for more native plant nurseries that do not use neonicotinoid insecticides or other pesticides on their plants.

Nurseries are encouraged to learn more about the benefits of planting natives and to discontinue the sale of nonnative invasive plants like orange daylily, common periwinkle, and burning bush.

Nurseries listed on the PNPS website have pledged not to sell any Dirty Dozen plants or plants treated with neonicotinoid pesticides, and to concentrate the majority of their sales on native plants. Nurseries that sign the pledge earn the society's Native Plant Green Seal Nursery designation.

The information sheet suggests native alternatives for common nonnative invasives.



WO-SEPA 2023 Program & Event Schedule

October 11 Native Seed Collection Techniques

November 16 Elections; Chapter Native Seed Swap

Recordings of past meetings are on our Youtube channel.

Tree of the Month -- Fringe Tree

Chionanthus virginicus, white fringe tree, is a deciduous native shrub or small tree with a spreading, rounded habit. It typically grows 12’ to 20' tall, although trees up to 35' high have been found in the wild. Fringe tree occurs in naturally rich, moist woods and hillsides, moist stream banks, limestone glade margins, and rocky bluffs and ledges.

Plant fringe tree in full sun to part shade, in moist, fertile soils. It is intolerant of drought and should be sheltered from strong winds. Because it’s susceptible to deer browsing, protect this tree with a cage of wire fencing until it is tall enough for the leaves to be out of reach. This tree grows slowly, so it will need protection for some time.

Fringe tree’s common name refers to its drooping clusters (4” to 6" long) of fringe-like, creamy white, fragrant petals in spring. *Chionanthus* is dioecious (separate male and female plants), but it may also have some perfect flowers on each plant.

A mature fringe tree is covered with clouds of fragrant white flowers in late spring. This tree works well as a specimen tree or at the edge of a woodland planting in neutral to slightly alkaline soil.

Fringe tree’s wide, spear-shaped leaves (to 8" long) turn yellow-bronze in autumn.

Fringe tree is a member of the olive family. Its dark blue, grape-like clusters of fruits develop from female blossoms and resemble small olives. The drupes are a popular food source for birds and wildlife.

Fringe Tree Quick Facts

Height	12 to 20 feet
Habit	rounded form
Growth Rate	slow
Soil	rich, moist, well-drained; neutral to slightly alkaline
Flowers	fragrant white tassels in spring
Fruit	small blue-black drupes in fall
Leaves	yellow color in fall
Habitat	moist upland woods, stream banks
Wildlife Value	drupes eaten by songbirds

Plant Propagation in a Gravel Seed Bed

Starting native plants from seed is a great way to increase your plant palette. Many native grasses and forbs can be started from seed, especially if you winter-sow them. But what if you don't have the time or inclination to do that? You can still produce low-cost seedlings for your garden with very little effort. All you need are a few willing seed-producing parent plants and a bed of gravel. Time and nature will supply the seedlings.

The gravel seed bed method has been used for eons. If you have gravel, brick, or stone paths or a stone driveway on your property, you can use these areas to produce seedlings of native plants you want to propagate.

Creating Gravel Beds

You can create a special area for a gravel seed bed, or use areas where plants naturally reseed on your property. Gravel paths and patios can double as seed beds.

Gravel or stone beds work best when they are at least 3" to 4" deep. Brick or stone paths make good seed beds if they are laid on bare ground. Paths laid on a bed of screenings may take longer to become seed beds because seeds generally need a bit of soil along with gravel in order to germinate.

Even if your gravel bed is in sun, the gravel below the surface usually will remain moister than the surrounding soil, enabling plants to germinate and grow which would not ordinarily tolerate hot conditions. Bear this in mind when selecting a site to transplant your seedlings.

Plant List

Not all natives are good reseeders, but here are some that work well with no effort:

Agastache	*Ratibida*
Asters	*Rudbeckia*
Blue mist flower	Rush
Columbine	*Salvia*
Coreopsis	Sedges
Penstemon	Tulip tree
Redbud	*Viola*

← Blue mist flower seedlings (*Conoclinium coelestinum*) in gravel driveway.

Columbine seedling (*Aquilegia* spp.) in flagstone patio. →

Salvia lyrata seedling in gravel driveway. ↘

Soft rush seedling (*Juncus effusus*) in flagstone patio. →

Your "mother plants" will be those in the beds adjacent to the gravel bed areas. You can create gravel seed beds next to plants you'd like to propagate by adding an area of gravel near the base of those plants.

When to Transplant Seedlings

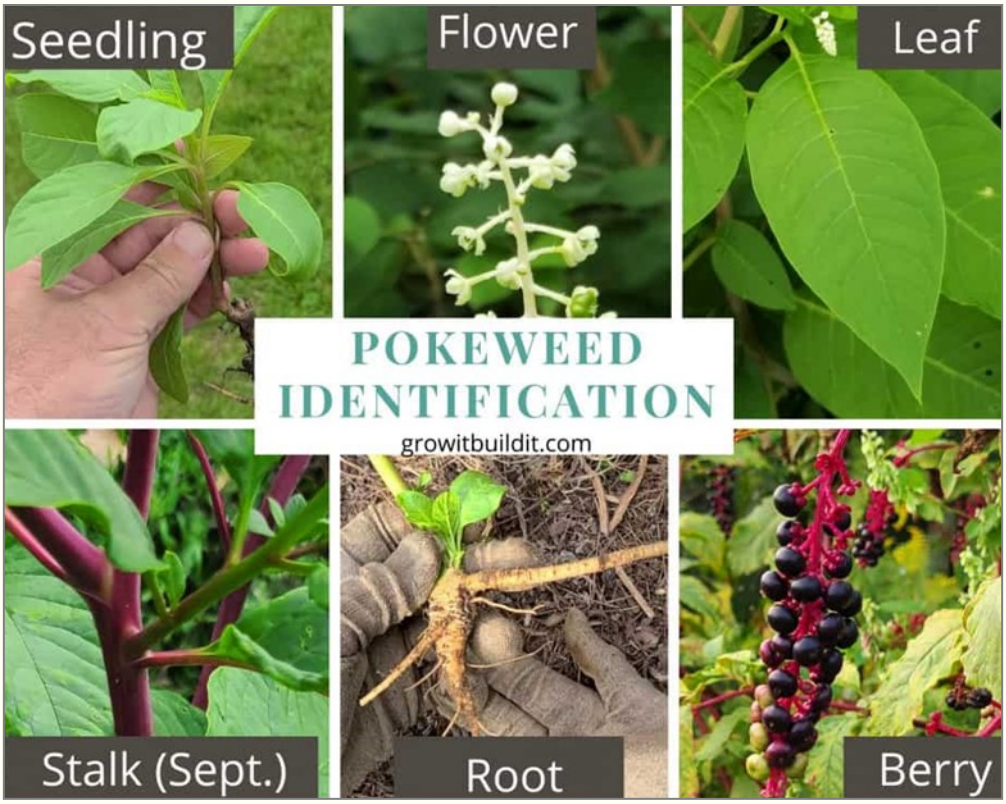
Most seedlings can be moved when they are 2" to 3" three inches high and/or wide, but this can vary with the species.

Seedlings will usually transplant well if you remove them from the bed carefully. The smaller the seedling, the easier it will move. Seedlings from prolific self-sowers tend to grow in clusters, so you can often move a cluster of seedlings together, which minimizes damage to the roots. Some plants quickly form long roots that make transplanting more difficult. Tree seedlings are one example of seedlings that need to be moved when they're quite small.

Spotlight on Plants with "Weed" in the Name -- Pokeweed

Pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*) is one of the largest herbaceous native perennials. It can reach 10' in height in full sun and moist soil. it easily recognized by its dark red stems, large leaves, and clusters of dark purple berries. Pokeweed is valuable to wildlife, and despite its toxicity, it has a history of being used as food and medicine.

Pokeweed readily colonizes disturbed areas. It self-seeds heavily, and seeds are also spread by birds and mammals that eat the berries. The seeds can remain viable in the soil for years. When an area is cleared for rewilding, pokeweed may appear as an early colonizer that can get out of control.



Pokeweed emerges in mid spring with large light green alternate leaves on multiple soft stems. Plants mature quickly with regular rainfall. Small white flowers appear in long clusters in summer. By September, its dark purple berries create a dramatic display on bright red stems, and the plant's mature stalks begin to turn dark red.

Pokeweed prefers full sun but will thrive equally in partial shade, at a lower height. Established plants can tolerate some drought, but a dry year seldom kills a mature plant due to the thick root.

Pokeweed is pollinated mainly by small sweat bees and syrphid flies. Its chief wildlife value is the prolific berries, which are eaten by over 20 species of native birds, including bluebirds, catbirds, cardinals, mockingbirds, thrushes, waxwings, mockingbirds, kingbirds, and woodpeckers.

Pokeweed is rarely grazed by deer and other mammals due to the toxicity of the foliage and sap. Although the berries are toxic to humans and domestic pets, they are eaten by foxes, raccoons, and possums.

Although pokeweed can be a valuable native plant in some habitats, its ability to rapidly colonize newly planted areas and overtake many slower-growing natives means that it might need to be controlled. Managing pokeweed is a season-long activity. Seedlings can be pulled fairly easily when they are small (under 1' high), but if the root is not pulled, it can re-grow during the season.

Pokeweed can germinate under the foliage of mature plants and suddenly pop into view when it's several feet tall. At this point, the root must be dug up if the plant is to be removed.

Cutting down a mature plant at the soil level will often result in the plant re-sprouting with multiple stems. Repeated cutting at the soil level throughout the season is required for this method of removal to succeed.

A first-year pokeweed plant has a root that is usually small enough to dig out with a hand trowel. More mature plants will need to be removed with a shovel in order to get enough root to prevent re-sprouting.

The sap of pokeweed is a harsh skin irritant that can cause a painful rash. It's especially important to avoid touching your eyes with hands or gloves that have contacted pokeweed sap. Children should be warned to avoid tasting the berries, which may look like small wild grapes but are extremely toxic.

Invasive Plant Alert -- Japanese Stilt Grass

The slender bright green foliage of Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*) is in full growth in our area by late summer. This is a critical time to attack this destructive invasive, even if you've been mowing it back since spring.

Even where this grass has been established for only a few years, it can form a dense groundcover that smothers native plants and prevents regeneration of forests and fields. Stiltgrass out-competes native wildflowers, shrubs, and saplings, destroying biodiversity and habitat for animals, birds, and insects.

Stiltgrass has been in this country for just over a century, coming from Asia most likely in packing materials. It is now found in most eastern states, from New York to Florida and west to the Mississippi River and Texas.

How Stiltgrass Spreads

Stiltgrass seeds germinate earlier in spring than crabgrass and mature later in fall (late August to September in southeastern Pennsylvania). A single plant can produce up to 1,000 seeds that can remain viable in the soil for up to 5 years. Soil disturbance enhances germination.

Stiltgrass seeds move to new sites via stormwater and on vehicle tires, hikers' boots, and animals. It colonizes forests, fields, meadows, lawns, roadsides, hiking trails, animal trails, utility line cuts, and riparian areas such as wetlands, streamsides, floodplains, and edges of ponds. Where fallen or cut trees open the canopy to sunlight and areas of disturbed soil, stiltgrass is likely to invade.

Stiltgrass invades woods on hikers' boots and animals' feet. It spreads along the edges and moves into the forest by outcompeting native understory plants.

Photo credit: Blue Ridge Prism Fact Sheet

Stiltgrass is a ruderal plant — a species that exploits areas of recent soil disturbance, such as tilling, mowing, and foot/deer traffic. It thrives in moist, acidic to neutral soils that are relatively high in nitrogen. Stiltgrass readily invades shaded areas and can also tolerate full sun and even short periods of drought. It can thrive in lawns despite repeated mowing.

Control Methods

Small infestations of stiltgrass can be pulled by hand because the roots are very shallow. Cutting plants off at ground level with a string trimmer is also effective because it removes all stem tissue, making stiltgrass unable to regrow. Mowing is not as effective as string trimming unless it is repeated throughout the growing season, because stiltgrass will regrow from any remaining stem nodes.

Timing is critical. Many sources recommend delaying mechanical removal until June to avoid a second flush of germination. However, some gardeners prefer to attack stiltgrass from the beginning, as part of ongoing maintenance. If stiltgrass seedlings are removed consistently over the year, native plants will seed in unless the area has been heavily treated with systemic herbicides. Over several years, an area formerly overrun by stiltgrass can be recolonized by native groundcovers such as sedges and violets, and ruderal forbs like ironweeds (*Vernonia* spp, *Verbesina alternifolia*), enchanter's nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*), American germander (*Teucrium canadense*), and white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*). During the reseeding period, continued removal of stiltgrass seedlings is important to keep it from reclaiming ground.

New York State Parks & Recreation has had success smothering stiltgrass infestations with 4"-6" of leaf mulch or wood chips and seeding natives directly into the decomposing layer. Recommendations for reseeding include jewelweed, northern sea oats, Virginia wild rye, bottlebrush grass, and bee balm. Natives that spread quickly and can be planted to out-compete stiltgrass include golden ragwort, ostrich fern, sensitive fern, wild ginger, Carolina allspice, sweet fern, and bottlebrush buckeye.

Resources

Blue Ridge Prism Fact Sheet

UCONN Invasive Plant Fact Sheet

Why We Need Insects and Other Invertebrates

The Xerces Society reminds us how critical butterflies, bees, dragonflies, beetles, spiders, mussels, and other invertebrates are to the survival of our ecosystem. One study found that the ecosystem services provided by insects (pollination, filtration of streams and rivers, decomposition of organic waste, and insect control) are worth more than $80 billion a year to the U.S. economy.

Our world depends on invertebrates. They pollinate our crops as well as the native plants that feed wildlife. They are the first level in the food chain that converts plant energy to food that animals can eat. They control pest insects like mosquitos, aphids, and mealybugs. They convert organic waste (leaves, woody detritus, and composted food) into nutrients that will nourish a new generation of plants. They filter impurities from the water in streams and lakes.

Causes of Decline. Fragmented habitat, overdevelopment, and pesticides have caused a huge decline in insect numbers and threaten many species with extinction. But insects are resilient -- land conservation, habitat restoration, and decreased use of insecticides and herbicides can allow insect populations to recover.

What You Can Do. If we hope to stem the losses of invertebrate diversity and abundance, we must act at every level to protect and restore habitat. Each of us can contribute, wherever we live. Leave the leaves, don't use insecticides and herbicides, support regenerative farming, turn off outdoor lighting at night, and grow more native plants, whether in pots on a balcony or in place of a lawn.

Educational Opportunities

Sept 20 Mornings in the Meadow. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, 1635 River Rd, New Hope PA. 9:00 a.m.

Sept 21 Fall Gardening for Pollinators: Creating a Resilient Garden for All Seasons. Xerces Society webinar. 1:00 p.m.

Sept 23 Knowing Native Plants: Classic Asters & Their Colorful Companions. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, webinar or on site, 1635 River Rd, New Hope PA. 10:00 a.m.

Sept 23 Water-Wise Gardening. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.

Sept 23 Greenixville. Phoenixville Farmers Market, 200 Mill St, Phoenixville PA. 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Sept 27 or Sept 30 Gardening in Cooperation with Nature (and Neighbors). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 1:00 p.m.

Sept 30 Herbal Properties of Native Plants. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.

Oct 6 Weeds 101: Fall Section. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.

Oct 7 Best Woody Plants for Wildlife. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.

Oct 7 Knowing Native Plants: Trees of the Preserve. Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, webinar or on site, 1635 River Rd, New Hope PA. 1:00 p.m.

Oct 10 Seed Collecting. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 9:00 a.m.

Oct 12 Creating & Managing Landscapes for Native Bees. Wild Ones webinar. 7:00 p.m.

Oct 14 Lawn-Less Yards. Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Rd, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.

Oct 19 Native Plants in YOUR Landscape. New Directions in American Landscape webinar. 3:00 p.m.

Oct 22 Artful Plant Community Design. New Directions in American Landscape webinar. 3:00 p.m.