



Southeastern  
Pennsylvania

# March-April 2026 Newsletter

[sepa.wildones.org](http://sepa.wildones.org)

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## Native Plants for Winter Interest

Select native plants first for their ecological value, focusing on keystone species. Second, plant for winter interest -- there's so much to work with!

- Bark texture and color -- sycamore, river birch, shagbark hickory, ninebark
- Stem color -- red-twig dogwood
- Evergreen foliage -- eastern red cedar, white pine, American holly
- Berries -- winterberry, American holly, eastern red cedar, bayberry, blackhaw viburnum, red chokeberry
- Early winter flowers -- witch hazel, pussy willow
- Structure -- little bluestem, *Rudbeckia*, cone-flower, joe pye

Some plants stay green all winter when they're not covered with snow -- sedges, *Penstemon* spp, *Packera* spp, *Heuchera* spp, *Silene caroliniana*.



Little bluestem  
(*Schizachyrium scoparium*)



River birch  
(*Betula nigra*)



Staghorn sumac  
(*Rhus typhina*)

Winterberry holly  
(*Ilex verticillata*)



Red-twig  
dogwood  
(*Cornus sericea*)

### WO SEPA 2026 CALENDAR

**Apr. 24** Meet-up at Jenkins Arboretum Garden Shop opening, 10:00 a.m.

**May 14** Behind-the-scenes tour, Octoraro Farm Nursery, 10:00 a.m.

Watch recordings of past programs on our [YouTube channel](#).

## Designing and Planting in Small Garden Spaces

Not all gardens have the space for a lot of tall trees or a pocket meadow or prairie. Smaller gardens and small spaces within a larger property have different design requirements than large spaces do. Good design can be especially important for village or suburban yards that are very visible to neighbors and passersby.

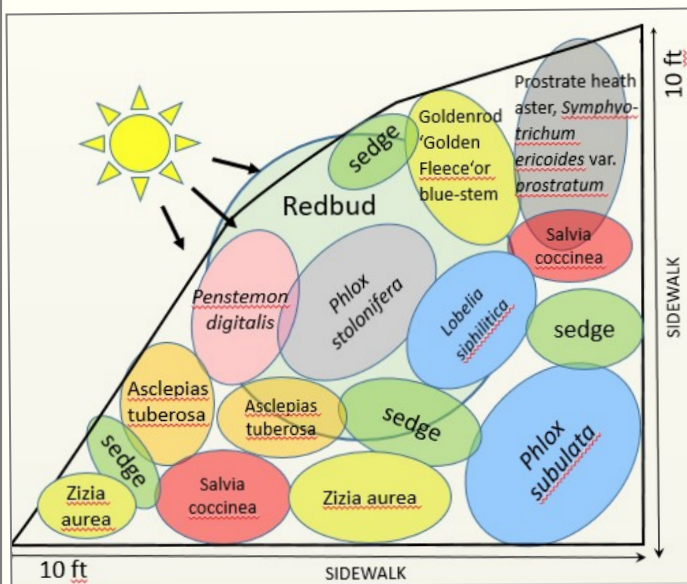
*Just letting plants ramble about, get tall, flop into sidewalks - and appear totally disheveled and out of control while blocking sight lines -- is a detriment to what we hope to achieve by encouraging neighbors to rethink lawn monocultures.*

*Ben Vogt*

Designing in layers is a basic tenet of all garden design and applies to small garden spaces as well as larger areas. The difference is that in a small space, you might have room for only one or two structural elements. This might be a small tree or a multistem shrub, something that grows no taller than 10 to 25 feet. No matter how small it is, the structural element should stand above the other layers.

The middle layer should provide most of your seasonal color and form. Choose plants that provide multi-season habitat value as well as sensory interest. Aim for at least two species with flowers, fruits, or colorful leaves in each season.

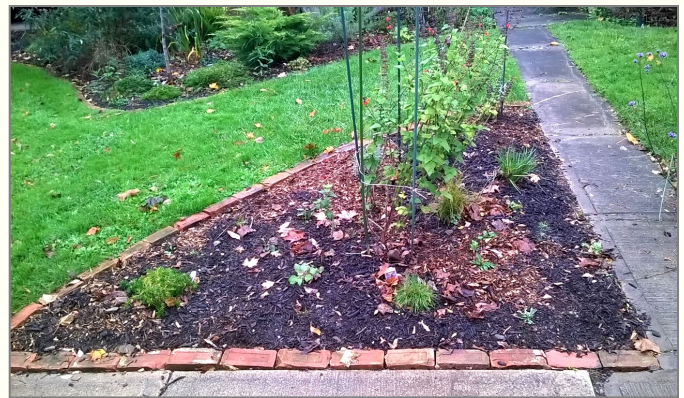
The groundcover layer (in this design, sedges,



phlox, prostrate heath aster, and penstemon) provides living mulch between the other plants, so that once all the plants are established, no mulch will be needed.

Notice that nothing fragile is planted right next to the sidewalk, because this area can be damaged by winter shoveling and four-footed visitors.

Communicate that your plantings are intentional and not just “plants gone wild” by using design signals that people understand. Signs are easy and obvious. Other indications are borders around the beds -- you can use bricks, landscape pavers, or native rocks. If your goal is to replace your lawn with native plantings, the lawn can be reduced to paths between your beds. This reassures the neighbors that you still have some lawn, however minimal.



### Design Tips

In a smaller space, you can use a focal point to showcase a dramatic plant, like coral honeysuckle on an arbor, or create a contrasting color and texture to the plants with a stone statue, metal sculpture, or water feature.

A single big, bold-textured plant can also serve as a focal point. You might think that cup plant (*Sylphium perfoliatum*), which grows up to 7 feet tall, is too large for a



small planting, but one clump (well-supported, because it tends to lean) of these huge leaves and dramatic gold flowers can really draw attention. Cup plant also attracts birds and insects that sip water caught in its large leaves. In the fall, goldfinch will hang on the seed heads as they search for food. Rose mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) needs wetter soil, but if you have that, this plant is a drama queen, with huge colorful flowers all summer. It can get tall (to 6 feet), but you can cut it back in June for a shorter, bushier plant.

Limit the height of everything except your structural plant to 1/3 of the longest side of the bed. Site taller plants toward the center of the bed and the lowest growers at the edges. Keep species that tend to flop away from the edges of the bed.

Rather than trying to cram in as many different plants as possible, limit your species palette, and plant in groups so the eye isn't overwhelmed by a lot of different colors and textures in a small area. The smaller the space, the shorter the species list. For a 10 x 10-foot area, you might have one structural plant, four or five species in the second layer (seasonal interest), and another three or four species in the groundcover layer, depending on soil and moisture conditions.

Planting in groups helps showcase each species' distinctive features and is also more attractive to pollinators. Allowing plants to spread and intermingle is fine in a larger planting, but in a smaller space, where the plants are closer to the viewer, this can look disorganized. Planting in groups allows the eye to distinguish the different colors, textures, and sizes when viewed up close. Below, the slender white flower spires of foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) poke through clumps of fine-textured Appalachian sedge.



## Plant Selection

Include native grasses and sedges as well as flowering plants. The dense, fibrous root systems of these plants help prevent weeds from getting established, and the structure of these plants provides year-round interest.

Except for the groundcover layer, you want your plants to stay roughly where you plant them. Use species that form clumps rather than being aggressive spreaders -- great blue lobelia rather than blue mist flower; golden Alexanders rather than golden ragwort.

You don't need to avoid bold-textured foliage and large flowers just because you're planting in a smaller space. The hand-sized leaves and showy flower clusters of oak-leaf hydrangea (*H. quercifolia*) and the dramatic prickly looking spikes of rattlesnake master (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) provide good visual contrast as well as a focal point.

Other plants with dramatic texture include goatsbeard (*Aruncus dioicus*), false indigo (*Baptisia* spp), and Joe Pye (*Eutrochium* spp) (right).



When plantings are viewed up close, one or two clumps with dramatic flowers, color, or height can make the whole planting pop. If visitors like what they see, they will be less likely to find fault with the planting and might even become supporters of native gardening.

## RESOURCES

[Native Plants for the Small Yard](#)

[Native Landscape Plans](#)

[Front Yard Formal: A Way to Middle Ground](#)

[DIY Garden Designs with Birds in Mind](#)

## Tree of the Month -- Dogwoods

Native dogwoods are important components of natural landscapes in the eastern United States. These understory species play an important role in enhancing biodiversity and restoring ecosystems from upland forests to wetlands.

The dogwood's fibrous root system, particularly in shrubby species like silky and red osier dogwood, helps anchor soils prone to erosion, reducing sedimentation in waterways and protecting water quality and aquatic habitat. Reintroducing dogwoods into degraded wetlands creates habitat for a diverse range of insects, birds, and small mammals.

Dogwoods also play a key role in the calcium cycle of the forest. Calcium is an essential nutrient for both plants and animals. Dogwoods, unlike most other plants, have the ability to absorb calcium from soil and rocks. The trees concentrate the mineral in their leaves and wood. When the leaves fall in autumn, that calcium becomes available to the rest of the plants and animals in the forest.

### White Dogwood, *Cornus florida*

White dogwood is a medium-size slow-growing understory tree that prefers to grow at the edges of woodlands. It commonly has a short trunk and spreading, nearly horizontal branches that show off the large white flowers in spring. What look like white or occasionally pink flower petals are actually modified leaves, called bracts, which lure pollinators to the tiny yellow flowers in the center of the bracts.



Each tiny flower produces a small red fruit that is relished by birds. Most parts of this tree, from bark to fruit to leaves to twigs, attract a wide range of

wildlife, from chipmunks to deer. White dogwood seedlings should be caged until the branches are above deer-browse height, and the trunk might also need to be protected from buck rub.

In the fall, the leaves turn bright red, orange, or reddish-purple. Even young trees can provide vivid fall color (right).



Dogwoods prefer moist, rich, slightly acidic well-drained soil in part shade. Filtered shade is ideal, with exposure to morning sun rather than hot afternoon sun. Because of their shallow roots and salt intolerance, avoid planting dogwood near roads or sidewalks.

White dogwood benefits from a dense underplanting of spring ephemerals, grasses, sedges, or perennials to keep the root system from drying out. These trees should be planted in sites with good air circulation, such as the edge of a bed or woods, as they are susceptible to powdery mildew and anthracnose.

#### Habitat value

In addition to providing nutritious fruit for fall-migrating birds, dogwood is a host plant for the spring azure butterfly.

#### Quick Facts -- White Dogwood

<b>Size</b>	20-40 feet tall, 20-25 feet wide
<b>Sun</b>	Filtered sun; part shade
<b>Soil</b>	Prefers moist rich slightly acidic soil but can adapt to sandy or clay loam
<b>Water</b>	Does not tolerate wet feet or severe drought
<b>Habitat Value</b>	Fruits eaten by birds and mammals; host plant for spring azure butterfly; twigs browsed by white-tailed deer

## The Many Faces of Goldenrod

Excerpted from [Solidago for the Mid-Atlantic Regions](#), Research Report, Mt. Cuba Center, 2026

Goldenrods are among the top-ranked plants for supporting biodiversity in North America. The abundant late-season flowers of this keystone species provide nectar for pollinators preparing to overwinter in place or migrate to warmer climates. Goldenrods are one of the top 30 keystone host plants for native insects, supporting 104 species of moths and butterflies and 42 species of pollen-specialist bees. These caterpillars are also important protein sources for many birds as they raise their young.

But maybe you've heard that goldenrods are not desirable garden plants. Canada goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) is the plant most people associate with weediness. Although this plant is native to North America and its flowers produce copious amounts of late-season pollen and nectar that benefit native insects, it's also an aggressive grower that can overwhelm landscapes and out-compete other natives. This goldenrod spreads aggressively via rhizomes to form dense colonies that can choke out slower-spreading native grasses in a meadow or prairie. It also sets an enormous amount of seed, which is dispersed widely by the wind and quickly establishes in bare soil.

Fortunately, many goldenrods are not as aggressive and pair well with other summer- and fall-blooming plants, such as asters (below).



Goldenrods are native to a wide variety of habitats in North America -- woodlands, bogs, sand dunes, rocky cliffs, and meadows. This diversity, plus the species' adaptability, means there's a goldenrod for almost every garden. When sited properly, goldenrods are not fussy plants to grow.

Most goldenrods display clusters of tiny golden-yellow composite flowers in spikes, cones, panicles, wands, or flat-topped discs, although a few species have white flowers. These blooms provide an enormous amount of pollen and nectar late in the season, which attract bees, wasps, and butterflies. During the winter, birds feed on the seeds as well as on insects that overwinter in goldenrod's sturdy stems.

The plants can be 3 to 6 feet tall, and most are quite deer resistant. Plant height can be controlled by cutting taller plants back by one-third before July 1 (often known as the "Chelsea chop").

The Mt. Cuba trial evaluated 70 species of goldenrod for their ornamental and ecological value. Plants were grown in full sun in clay-loam soil and were watered only during their first year. A sortable [spreadsheet](#) includes information about each species and cultivar in the trial, including size, plant form, bloom time, foliage texture, soil moisture preference, and recorded insect activity.

### Top performers for gardens

*Solidago rugosa* 'Fireworks' is a selection of wrinkle-leaf goldenrod that was found in a wet coastal plain habitat in North Carolina. It is a strong grower with sturdy, upright stems and coppery new growth. It spreads slowly, especially when grown in drier soil. In September and October the plant is covered with long, thin wands of golden florets (below). Good companion plants include aromatic aster (*Symphyotrichum oblongifolium*) and blue mist flower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*).



Autumn goldenrod (*S. sphacelata*) features low-growing clumps of coarse, heart-shaped leaves that spread gradually to form an effective groundcover in full to part sun and average soil. In late summer, tight clusters of golden flowers on curving wands

cover the plants. A compact selection, 'Golden Fleece', is a Mt. Cuba introduction with shorter flower spikes (below). Its shorter stature works well in smaller spaces and borders.



Ohio goldenrod (*S. ohioensis*) is another clump-former, but its distinctive, flat-topped flower heads on stiff stems resemble dill flowers. The plant grows 3 to 4 feet tall and prefers wet soil, making it ideal for rain gardens.

Blue-stem goldenrod (*S. caesia*) is a woodland species that's perfect for shade gardens, blending well with ferns (below) and white wood aster. This species is shorter, usually under 4 feet, with wiry purple stems. Unlike many goldenrods, its small flower clusters occur in each leaf axil almost all the way to the ground.



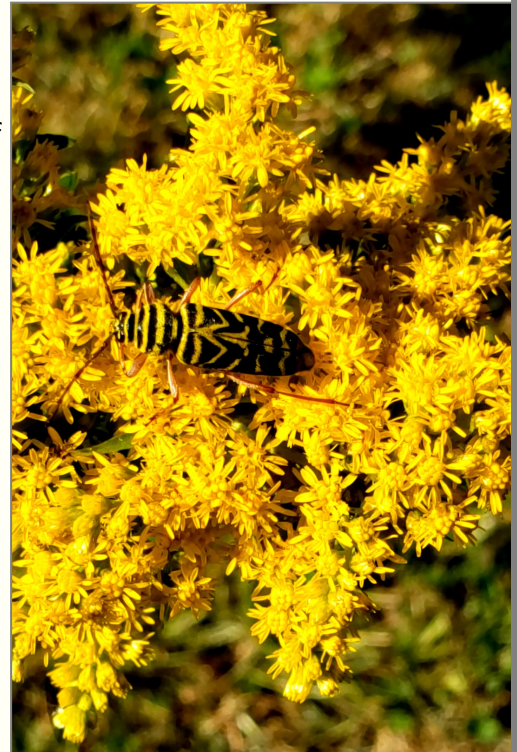
Zigzag goldenrod (*S. flexicaulis*) is another shade-loving species for woodlands and soft landing beds. It grows just 3 feet high, with flowers appearing in late summer to early fall in small clusters at the top of each stalk. The short stems of the flower clusters alternate from side to side on the stem, giving rise

to its common name. This goldenrod spreads easily by seed and rhizomes.

### Habitat value

Mt. Cuba's goldenrod trials included observations of insect activity on the plants. The planting attracted a tremendous diversity of insects, including beetles (below), bees, wasps, flies, moths, and butterflies, encompassing both generalist and specialist pollinators. Goldenrods support over 40 species of pollen-specialist bees and provide important late-season pollen and nectar for migrating insects and queen bumble bees foraging for their last pre-winter meal.

Goldenrods also host the caterpillars of more than 100 species of butterflies and moths in the Eastern Temperate Forest Region. These caterpillars feed on the leaves and flowers, and in turn provide food for predatory insects as well as for native birds to raise their young.



The trial also documented many bird species in the goldenrod planting, including fall-migrating warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets. These birds are primarily insect eaters, confirming that goldenrods attract a range of native insects.

Goldenrods generally are not preferred by deer, but only a few common species in the trial escaped with no deer browse, including sweet goldenrod (*S. odora*) and showy goldenrod (*S. speciosa*). Other species might be nibbled in early spring, but mature plants will just put out more shoots. Seedlings of susceptible varieties (consult the Mt. Cuba spreadsheet) can be protected until the plants are mature enough to handle some early browsing.

## Invasive Species -- Early Spring Tasks

Early spring is a great time to get ahead of woody invasive plants that are easier to spot and control when many natives are still dormant and it's easier to work in heavily planted locations.

Many invasive plants are successful in their nonnative habitat because they out-compete natives by leafing out earlier and/or growing and spreading more aggressively. Gardeners can use these traits to identify nonnatives and remove them effectively while access is easier.

### Impacts to Habitat

Common invasive woody plants in our area include bush honeysuckle, Japanese barberry, burning bush, multiflora rose, autumn/Russian olive, butterfly bush, privet, buckthorn, and *Nandina*. This list might look daunting, but these invasives share some traits that facilitate both identification and removal.

These plants all invade and destroy woodland habitat in basically the same way. Their berries are popular with birds, and the plants sprout and grow under a wide variety of conditions, including shade. That's how they escape cultivation and spread wherever birds spread their seeds.

These plants also leaf out weeks earlier in the spring than most natives, making them especially damaging to native spring ephemerals. The early shade cast by thickets of invasive woody plants, roughly from mid-April to mid-May here, is also when the forest floor relies critically on sunlight. During this briefly lit spring window, wildflowers bloom, tree seeds sprout, and ferns unroll their fronds. In woods infested with early-greening invasives, shade arrives before the forest floor has even woken up, and as a result many native plants will never emerge.

The seeds of some native plants can lie dormant in the soil for years, waiting for favorable conditions. You might notice natives starting to re-colonize once you've removed nonnative invaders. Common natives that often emerge on shady sites include sedges, violets, celandine poppy, and ostrich fern. On sunnier sites, you might see white snakeroot (*Ageratina altissima*) and Canada goldenrod. Less well-known native colonizers include enchanter's

nightshade (*Circaea lutetiana*), black snakeroot (*Sanicula odorata*), and white avens (*Geum canadense*). These natives show up because, like invasives, they are good at colonizing disturbed sites. If they're too aggressive for your site, replace them with your desired natives.

### Control

Fact sheets (see the box below) are a good way to learn to identify invasives on your site.

Control is a choice between removing the entire plant, including roots, and cutting the plant at or below the soil surface. Complete removal is a permanent solution for the existing plant(s) but doesn't prevent new infestations from seed. However, this method causes a lot of soil disturbance, which provides an opportunity for the dormant seeds of invasives to sprout. You might end up doing more work controlling a new batch of invasives.

One alternative to complete removal is to cut each stem or trunk just above the soil. This method requires follow-up at least once, later in the spring, to remove new shoots from the cut trunk, and again next spring to do the same thing. The more frequently you remove new shoots, the quicker the root system will die.

Another option is to remove just enough soil from the trunk(s) of the shrub to access the root crown. Cut through each root with heavy loppers, a pruning saw, or a chain saw, but don't pull the root out, as this will disturb too much soil. Cutting the roots below the root crown (where the trunks join the roots) will completely kill some of these invasives. However, others (notably *Euonymus*, multiflora rose, and autumn/Russian olive) will send up new shoots from the remaining underground root system. Check the fact sheet, or circle back during the season to remove new shoots from these plants.

The final step is to replant immediately with natives. Choose species that cover the ground quickly. Also watch for natives to seed in on their own -- you might be pleasantly surprised. Native volunteers can give you time to study your site and decide which additional natives might work best.

### RESOURCES

[Invasive Plant Fact Sheets](#)

[Invasive Plants](#)

[Invasive Plant Fact Sheets](#)

## Pruning Shrubs in Spring

Spring is a good time to prune certain native shrubs that might have grown too tall, slowed down on flowering, or gotten overcrowded in the center. The trick is to know which species to prune this spring, so you don't lose this year's flowers and fruit.

Some trees and shrubs form next year's buds in the fall, shortly after the fruit or seed from the current year matures. These buds are often very small and can barely be seen in the leaf axils until they swell in the spring. These shrubs should not be pruned in spring unless you're willing to lose this year's flowers and fruit. These species are described as flowering on "old wood" because the flowers that will bloom this year formed on last year's branches.

Many other native shrubs produce flower buds on branches that grow from their own buds in the spring. These shrubs are referred to as flowering on "new wood." Because they don't form buds until their branches start to grow in the spring, these species can be pruned before those branches start to grow, without losing this year's flowers and fruit.

Knowing which of your native shrubs bloom on old wood and which on new wood will help you decide which ones to prune this spring. Sometimes you can see the beginnings of new buds in the fall, which tells you that these shrubs bloom on old wood and shouldn't be pruned in spring unless you're willing to lose those flowers. These include early spring bloomers like *Fothergilla*, pussy willow, winterberry, Carolina allspice, ninebark, sumac, witch hazel, serviceberry, and spicebush.

Other early spring bloomers that flower on old wood include Carolina allspice, *Viburnums*, winterberry, sumacs, red and black chokeberry, ninebark, and serviceberry. If these shrubs need to be pruned for size or shaping, that should be done right after they bloom, to give new branches time to grow and form their buds for next year. This means that you'll lose some berries from the fruiting shrubs, on the branches that are cut.

Shrubs that bloom on new wood can be pruned in early spring, before this year's branches start to grow out. If you're pruning to control size, take into account the anticipated size of this year's new

growth. You can find this information by searching on line for how much the particular shrub is expected to grow in a year.

Make your pruning cuts selectively so you don't leave unsightly stubs of branches. Each bud along a branch is capable of producing a new flowering branch. Prune each branch just above a bud where you want a new branch to grow, but don't remove more than 2/3 of the length of any branch.

The direction the bud is facing will determine where the branch will grow. Inward-facing buds will produce a branch that grows toward the middle of the shrub. Outward-facing buds will do the opposite. For a shrub that's next to a walkway or a building, prune to buds that face away from the walkway or building rather than toward it.

Most twigs and branches have backup buds below the main bud. They can take over if the main bud is removed. Light pruning of the main branch when the plant is dormant will release growth hormones to these backup buds, producing more new branches that can flower.

This close-up of an elderberry branch shows three buds -- two where the smaller branch starts and one on the opposite side. Pruning the main branch back to these three buds and the small branch back to



its first bud could allow each of these buds to form branches and flower on new growth this year.

Native shrubs that bloom on new wood and can be pruned in early spring include:

Beautyberry	Button bush
Beach plum	Coralberry
<i>Diervilla</i>	Elderberry
New Jersey tea	Red-twig dogwood
Strawberry bush	Summersweet

### RESOURCES

[Is Your Native Shrub Too Tall?](#)

## Events and Educational Opportunities

- Mar. 14** [Knowing Native Plants: Signs of Spring](#). Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, 1635 River Rd, New Hope, PA, or virtual. 9:30 a.m.
- Mar. 14** [Lawn to Pollinator Garden](#). PennState Extension webinar. 9:00 a.m.
- Mar. 18** [Design-Less Gardening: A Naturalistic Approach](#). Mt. Cuba Center webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Mar. 19** [Discovering Our Spring Ephemeral Wildflowers](#). Lancaster Conservancy webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Mar. 21** [Explore the Art of Bonsai Using Native Trees](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- Mar. 21** [Gardening for Watershed Conservation](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 9:00 a.m.
- Mar. 23, 24, 30, 31** [Spring Garden Series](#). PennState Extension webinar. 6:30 p.m.
- Mar. 25** [The Secret Lives of Spring Wildflowers](#). Mt. Cuba Center webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Mar. 31** [Navigating BONAP: A Guide to the Biota of North America Program's New Website](#). Brandywine Conservancy webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Mar. 25** [The Secret Lives of Spring Wildflowers](#). Mt. Cuba Center webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Apr. 1, 8, 15, 22, 29, May 6** [Native Plants of Spring](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- Apr. 3** [Replacing Mulch with Spring Groundcovers](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- Apr. 3** [Shade-Loving Spring Perennials](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 1:00 p.m.
- Apr. 4** [Supporting Living Soil To Support Your Plants](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 1:30 p.m.
- Apr. 4** [Creating Habitat by Planting the Woodland Edge](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 3:00 p.m.
- Apr. 7** [April Showers Bring May Flowers Part 1](#). Brandywine Conservancy webinar. 6:30 p.m.
- Apr. 11** [Designing Your Native Perennial Garden](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 10:00 a.m.
- Apr. 11** [Managing Spring Weeds](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 1:00 p.m.
- Apr. 14** [April Showers Bring May Flowers Part 2](#). Brandywine Conservancy webinar. 6:30 p.m.
- Apr. 15** [Let It Glow: Protecting Fireflies in the Home Garden](#). Brandywine Conservancy webinar. 6:00 p.m.
- Apr. 18** [Knowing Native Plants: Spring Ephemerals](#). Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, 1635 River Rd, New Hope, PA, or virtual. 9:30 a.m.
- Apr. 25** [Designing Layered Landscapes](#). Mt. Cuba Center, 3120 Barley Mill Road, Hockessin, DE. 1:00 p.m.
- May 2** [Knowing Native Plants: Late Spring Lovelies](#). Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve, 1635 River Rd, New Hope, PA, or virtual. 9:30 a.m.
- May 2** [Central PA Native Plant Festival & Sale](#). PA Native Plant Society, Millbrook Marsh Nature Center, Puddingtown Rd, State College, PA. 10 a.m.