

Plant Virginia Natives: An Initiative Grounded in Collaboration

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Virginians are increasingly hearing that planting natives will help improve the environment – especially habitat for declining pollinator and bird populations – but many are not sure where to start.

Plant Virginia Natives is a collaborative initiative network of partners engaged in state-wide and regional strategies to increase the knowledge, use, and availability of native plants. The Virginia Coastal Zone Management Program (CZM) Program introduced, coordinates, and funded the initiative through grants from NOAA since 2008. Virginia CZM is a network of state agencies and coastal localities, with the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality as the lead agency. Regional marketing campaigns and partners across the commonwealth add additional support and resources to the project.

The Plant Virginia Natives initiative advances the shared goals of the partners outlined in an Action Plan (downloadable from PlantVirginiaNatives.org):

Goal 1: Continue to encourage and increase collaboration and coordination among partners engaged in native plant education, communication, and marketing.

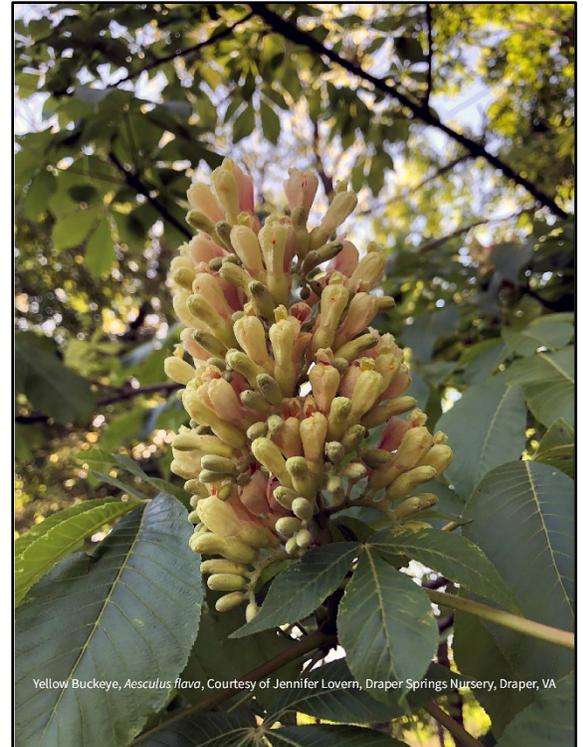
Goal 2: Enhance knowledge of the value of native plants.

Goal 3: Increase Virginia-grown native stock, and consumer access to native plants.

Goal 4: Increase demand and use of plants native to Virginia by:

- Landscape and land use professions (including engineers, landscape architects, and anyone involved in land development)
- Homeowners

Witmer and Hersch. Virginia Forest Landowner Update. V. 36 No. 2. Spring 2022.



Yellow buckeye is a native Virginia tree with showy yellow flowers in the spring. Photo by Jennifer Lovern, Draper Springs Nursery.

- Landscaping and demonstration restoration projects on public land (state, federal) and also private (landowners/non-profits)

One of the projects of the initiative is regional native plant marketing campaigns throughout the coastal zone, across the Piedmont, and into the mountains.

There are now nine regional campaigns in Virginia, engaging over 150 state, regional, and local partners.

The regional native plant marketing campaigns help meet the goals of the initiative by focusing on helping landowners learn more about their property and the ecological benefits of a native plant landscape; and recruiting local garden centers and other providers to promote and increase the supply and variety of the native plants they carry. The campaigns also work with local jurisdictions to strengthen policies that favor native plant landscaping.

The regional native plant campaign model basically has three components. The campaigns work with local and regional native plant providers on point-of-sale materials to help customers find native plants, such as signage and plant tags, thus encouraging both the demand for and supply of native plants.



Gray Dogwood, *Cornus racemosa*, Courtesy of Ian Caton, Wood Trush Natives, Floyd, VA

Gray dogwood is a native flowering woody option for wooded areas.

Photo by: Ian Caton, Wood Trush Natives.

Campaigns collect commitments or pledges to plant natives (such as signatures during public events.) A decal reminds people of their pledge. By displaying this decal in a publicly visible way, those who pledge also help spread the campaign's message within their community.

Finally, the campaigns use captivating communications to convey the benefits and to increase knowledge of native plants. Regional native plant guides have been the most popular resource. Seven guides have been published, including six coastal guides designed and funded by Virginia CZM - Eastern Shore, Northern Neck, Northern Virginia, Central Rappahannock, Virginia Capital region, Southeast Virginia, and the Northern Piedmont. Guides for the Southern Piedmont and Southwest Virginia are currently in production. Over 100,000 full-color guides have been distributed. All guides are downloadable from PlantVirginiaNatives.org, which is a growing hub for information about native plants, linking visitors to all the partners have to offer.

Each of these full-color guides highlights 100 or so species of flowering perennials, ferns, vines, grasses, shrubs, and trees with a photo, description, symbols for light and moisture requirements, wildlife value (butterfly, caterpillar, bird), and interesting facts. Indices list hundreds of additional species. The guides include sections on conservation landscaping; right plants for right places; native plant demonstration gardens; and, additional resources about native plants and landscaping with native plants. Each regional guide also highlights invasive plants of particular concern in the region and native alternatives.

The Plant SWVA Natives Campaign is the first campaign to reach the Mountain Region of Virginia. It covers from Roanoke and Botetourt County all the way to Lee County along the Tennessee and Kentucky borders. The New River Valley Regional Commission is supporting the campaign and recently received a grant from the Virginia Outdoors Foundation to create the Plant SWVA Natives Guide and start a native plant propagation program. The propagation program is a partnership with the non-profit Live, Work, Eat, Grow and will take place at a local community garden. Their current goal is to provide support to native plant education and get more native plants in the ground across Southwest. If you have suggestions or partnership ideas reach out to Nicole Hersch.

In 2021, the Plant Virginia Natives initiative offered a Landscaping with Virginia Natives webinar series with over 3,000 attendees across the state. Hundreds more have watched the recordings now available on PlantVirginiaNatives.org. The message of the 12-part webinar series is that every home landscape, with lawn areas reduced and planted with

natives, makes a big difference, and that the cumulative efforts of home gardeners and property owners across the state help create habitat corridors.

The series keynote presentation is given by entomologist, researcher, and author Dr. Doug Tallamy. A core concept of Tallamy's recent book, *Nature's Best Hope*, is an idea he calls the Homegrown National Park, one that is created by us, as individuals—in our own yards.

Doug Tallamy and fellow University of Delaware researcher Desirée Narango teamed up with Peter Marra, director of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, to investigate the link between nonnative plants and birds' population growth in these landscapes. The study, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* (<https://www.pnas.org/content/115/45/11549>), directly ties breeding success of birds to landscaping choices. The team's research focused on the Carolina chickadee, a species that needs insects to reproduce and survive, including thousands of caterpillars to rear its young. Properties dominated by nonnative plants have fewer plant-eating caterpillars. The research found that if landscapes in the chickadee's nesting and foraging range have more than 70 percent native plant biomass, chickadees have a chance to sustain their local population. As soon as the native biomass drops under 70 percent, that probability quickly plummets to zero. These observations of the chickadee are a loud conservation alarm for other birds like the warblers, vireos, and thrushes.

Tallamy says that in 84 percent of the counties in the U.S., native oaks are the most important tree followed by native cherries and native willows. While these three species are a valuable part of the tree canopy, when managing forests for biodiversity it is important to consider forest layers: canopy, understory, shrub, and groundcover. Each layer provides support, like habitat, cover, and food to a variety of wildlife. Regeneration of a diversity of plant species is key to ensure that our forests continue to support an abundance of life. To learn more about specific species in each layer right for your region of Virginia, visit PlantVirginiaNatives.org and download a plant guide near you.

Partners on the core planning team for the series included Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, Blue Ridge PRISM, Maymont Foundation, Virginia Native Plant Society, VDOT Pollinator Habitat Program, Virginia Master Naturalists, Virginia Master Gardeners, New River Valley Regional Commission, and the James River Chapter of the Garden Club of Virginia.

Blue Ridge PRISM (Partnership for Invasive Species Management), an organization focused on invasive species management, hosted Tallamy's presentation. The spread of invasive plants is an issue that is getting more attention and is also a topic addressed in the series.

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Encouraging landowners and gardeners everywhere to choose plants native to Virginia reduces the risk of invasive plants escaping and impacting our forests, fields, parks, waterways, and backyards. Find invasive species management resources, including invasive species fact sheets and control and management recommendations, at BlueRidgePRISM.org

Working together is proving to be a beneficial strategy for the Plant Virginia Natives initiative. The regional native plant marketing campaigns and the webinar series is an example of how collaboration among many partners helps us reach into all corners of the state with our shared message about the numerous benefits of Virginia's native plants.

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