

norfolk botanical garden

HORTICULTURE HIGHLIGHTS

Horticultural Highlights – Early to Mid-May 2023

Roses – Bicentennial Rose Garden

Get out there, and get out there now! It is a riot of color and fragrance.

Satsuki Azaleas – Airport Berm, Garden Wide

This group of azaleas are the last to bloom for the season. Satsuki means fifth month in Japanese, which is appropriate for these azaleas as they always bloom in May. In general, Satsukis are lower, wide spreading, have large single flowers, and can come in unusual color combinations.

Kousa Dogwood – Garden Wide

The other dogwood (*Cornus kousa*) is an Asian cousin to our own flowering dogwood and state tree (*Cornus florida*), but with notable differences. Kousa dogwoods get their leaves first, then the flowers appear afterwards, seeming to float atop the branches. They are also somewhat easier to grow than our native, being more resistant to insects and diseases. Like our native, the flowers are beautiful; the fruits are eaten by local wildlife; and in fall their foliage turns handsome colors before dropping to reveal attractive bark.

Oakleaf Hydrangeas – Colonial Garden, Rose Garden Bridge, Garden-wide

This hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) is the hydrangea for all seasons. At this time of year its flowers are the star with their white, showy, conical shape. Later in the summer the flowers age gracefully to a dusty pink, followed by a straw color. In the fall the foliage turns a handsome red, to burgundy, to orange. It is the best hydrangea species for fall foliage color. Even in winter they attract attention with their cinnamon colored exfoliating bark.

Japanese Maples – Japanese Garden, The Glade, Rhododendron Garden

Though they are typically associated with beautiful fall color, the spring foliage of Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) can be just as colorful, if not more so on some varieties. NBG has over 100 different varieties of this elegant tree.

Rhododendron – Rhododendron Garden

These azalea cousins have a reputation for being difficult to grow in Coastal Virginia. However, if you can provide them with very well drained soil in dappled shade you will be rewarded with great clusters of color and evergreen foliage.

Wildflower Meadow

This area of the garden is one of the most picturesque right now, and a great place to picnic!

Pomegranate – Japanese Garden, Sensory Garden

Even if pomegranates (*Punica granatum*) never provided deliciously tart fruit, high in anti-oxidants, it would be worth growing for its orangiest of orange flowers. So rich and bright that sun glasses are recommended.

Japanese Snowbell – Discovery Grove, Flowering Arboretum

This elegant tree (*Styrax japonica*), is covered in pendulous bell-shaped white flowers that hang from its wide-spreading branches. Where the Flowering Arboretum meets Shady Woods and Discovery Grove are two very impressive specimens, including the Virginia state champion!

Star Jasmine – Circle Garden

This Southern favorite (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*) is one of the most fragrant vines filling the air with its vanilla-like fragrance. It is evergreen, thrives in heat and humidity, but Coastal Virginia is about as far north as it will tolerate.

Mountain Laurel – Mirror Lake

This native plant (*Kalmia latifolia*) is one of North America's loveliest shrubs. The flowers come in shades of pink, white, and red, and their unusual buds and blooms are best appreciated up close. Although they have a reputation for being difficult to grow, where they are happy they are prolific – like Mirror Lake.

Hostas – Statuary Vista, Admin Welcome Garden, Garden-wide

This familiar garden perennial prefers shady locations, especially in Southern climates. Grown primarily for their diverse foliage textures and colors, there are several thousand different varieties to choose from. While NBG does not have quite that many, it does have enough to qualify as designated hosta garden, so says the American Hosta Society.

Soap Aloe – NATO Hill

Among the many unusual plants to be found on NATO Hill are several specimens of the soap aloe (*Aloe maculata*). At the moment their flower stalks are covered in orange blooms, potentially luring a passing hummingbird. This African species is hardy in Coastal Virginia, but only in the right location. They must have full hot sun and exceptionally well drained soil. An aloe in soggy wet soil will soon be a dead aloe, especially in winter.

Coral Honeysuckle – Wildflower Meadow

Most people are familiar with the sweetly scented Japanese honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), but don't let that fragrance fool you, it is a terribly invasive plant. Replace it with our own native coral honeysuckle (*L. sempervirens*). Its coral-orange flowers are hummingbird magnets. The all yellow variety 'John Clayton' was found in nearby Gloucester Co., and 'Major Wheeler' is an all-red variety.

Southern Magnolia – Flowering Arboretum

This is one of the classic trees (*Magnolia grandiflora*) of Southern gardens. Large white flowers are open right now, and they have an intoxicating fragrance. Evergreen, native, wind-resistant, they are easy to grow in full sun to partial shade. However, they can be very messy. Even though they are evergreen, the leaves will drop, just not all at once, and they take a very long time to decompose. If the branches are allowed to remain low to the ground this will hide many of those fallen leaves.

Red Hot Poker – Butterfly Garden, Baker Perennial Garden, NATO Tower, and elsewhere

This South African plant (*Kniphofia* species and hybrids) sends up tall dramatic spikes of orange, red, yellow, to white flowers, often with several different colors at the same time. They prefer full sun in very well drained soil, attract hummingbirds, and they make a great cut flower as well.

Virginia Sweetspire – WOW, Boat Basin, and many other places

This plant (*Itea virginica*) is one of our great native shrubs. In late spring it is covered in white bottlebrush flowers, which are beautiful, but this plant is as equally known for its colorful fall foliage which turns shades of red, orange, yellow, and burgundy. Easy to grow, this plant prefers full sun to partial shade in moist well drained soil, but it is adaptable and drought tolerant once established.

Wildlife Watch – With the warmer weather here now, look for our turtles basking in the sun. NATO Pond is a great place to see them. However, please don't feed them, no matter how much they beg.

Les Parks, Director of Horticulture