Horticultural Highlights – Mid-Spring 2024

Roses – Bicentennial Rose Garden

NBG has one of the largest rose gardens on the East Coast. Typically, they will peak near Mothers’ Day weekend, but we will have blooms through the fall.

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.

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.

Fenway Park Boston Ivy – Fragrance Garden

Found just outside of Fenway Park in Boston, this Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata* 'Fenway Park') has dramatic golden yellow new growth, maturing to chartreuse in summer, and going red in the fall. You don’t have to be a Sox fan to enjoy it.

Mayapple – Mirror Lake, Enchanted Forest

This unusual native perennial (*Podophyllum peltatum*) loves to live in shady places, and will spread slowly to form large lush patches. The foliage is very handsome, as are the flowers hidden underneath. Mayapples rely on eastern box turtles to disperse their seeds, and traveling through the digestive system of the turtle increases the seeds’ germination rate substantially, enough so that we would likely not have the plant without the turtle.

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.

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.

Red Buckeye – Flowering Arboretum, Enchanted Forest, and other places

The ruby throated hummingbirds are returning from their winter retreats in warmer climates, and they need some food. They are fond of tubular shaped flowers full of nectar, and our native red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) provides welcome sustenance.

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.

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 Snowbell – Discovery Grove, Flowering Arboretum

This elegant tree (*Styrax japonica*), is covered in May with 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!

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.

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.

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

This plant (*Itea virginica*) is one of our great native shrubs. In mid to 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.

Bonsai Collection – Transition Garden

NBG is somewhat unique that our bonsai collection is managed by a group of dedicated and passionate volunteers. Over the past few years they have been able to substantially grow our collection and it now includes some amazing pieces, many of which were created from ordinary plants growing in our gardens or nursery.

Wildlife Watch – Ospreys have returned to the shores of Lake Whitehurst where they like to fish. Keep your ears open for their distinct calls.

*Les Parks, Director of Horticulture*