Horticultural Highlights – Mid April 2024

Azaleas – Garden Wide
This iconic shrub is draping the Garden in an array of colors. They should reach their peak bloom by the middle of the month. While you are enjoying the colors, please remember to thank the ladies and gentlemen who cleared the wild brush that was here to plant azaleas way back in 1938.

Flowering Dogwood – Garden-wide
Other states get both a state tree and a state flower. Shortchanged Virginians have to be satisfied that our state tree and state flower are one in the same. To make matters worse it is the state flower for North Carolina and the state tree of Missouri, and flowering dogwood’s botanical name (*Cornus florida*) calls to mind the Sunshine State. These have just started to open in parts of the Garden and should be at peak bloom in just a few weeks.

Camellias – Hofheimer Camellia Garden
These old Southern favorites are actually native to China, Japan, and Korea. Camellias (*Camellia japonica* and hybrids) are prized for their large showy, winter and spring-blooming flowers. Although they are planted throughout NBG, the best place to see them is in the Hofheimer Camellia Garden. NBG has an internationally recognized camellia collection with over 1000 different varieties and nearly 2000 individual plants. This has been a spectacular year for them, but their time will be ending soon, so see them while you can.

Chinese Ground Orchids – Statuary Vista, Japanese Garden
Most people think of orchids as something exotic to enjoy indoors. However, there are hardy species that grow outdoors, and one of our favorites is the Chinese ground orchid (*Betilis striata*). Rising above iris-like foliage are sprays of magenta or white flowers. This easy-to-grow perennial will add a spot of spring color in areas with partial shade.

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.

Saltcedar – Sensory Garden, Matson Garden
This plant (*Tamarix ramosissima*) has beautiful sprays of dusty pink flowers which will be followed by wispy blue-green foliage. A quick on-line search for saltcedar will come with many warnings to not plant this invasive species. However, this is primarily a problem west of the Mississippi and the species behaves here. One gardener’s trash is another gardener’s treasure.

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.

Crabapples – Flowering Arboretum, Discovery Grove, and other places
One of spring’s showiest flowering trees (*Malus* species), crabapples also do double duty in late summer by providing colorful fruit. They are indeed closely related to the apples we eat, but their fruit is smaller. Catch them quickly, their blooms do not last forever.

Camassia – Administration Garden, Flowering Arboretum
When Lewis and Clark arrived hungry into the Pacific Northwest, the Native Americans fed them a variety of foods. Included in the meals were what Clark referred to as an onion-like plant. It was *Camassia*, a.k.a. quamash. Today, we grow this North American bulbous plant for its ornamental beauty, and not for its nutritional value. Look for clear blue flowers (sometimes white) blooming in great drifts in the Flowering Arboretum, and along the main road in front of the NBG Administration building.

Chinese Snowball Viburnum – The Border Garden
The large pale lime blossoms of this plant (*Viburnum macrocephalum*) will make some think a hydrangea on steroids has bloomed way too early. Their blossoms are so similar, but this old-fashioned favorite is always an early spring bloomer. We have two in The Border Garden that are quite large and always draw attention.

Lady Banks Rose – Rose Garden, Baker Perennial Garden
Always the first rose to bloom, Lady Banks (*Rosa banksiae*) is unlike any other in that it not only blooms very early, but it is also thornless, quite vigorous, and is never plagued by the same diseases that other roses get. For the plant nerds among us – the world’s largest Lady Banks rose has been growing in Tombstone, AZ since 1885 and covers a whopping 8000 square feet!

Spanish Bluebells – Garden-wide
Most spring flowering bulbs need to have full sun, but Spanish bluebells (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*) light up shadier areas of the garden with pools of sky-blue color (though they are also available in pink or white). This bulb is also an excellent naturalizer.

Kwanzan Cherries – Statuary Vista, Flowering Arboretum
This cherry (*Prunus serrulata* ‘Kwanzan’) is the last of the ornamental cherries to bloom. It differs from ‘Yoshino’ and the weeping varieties in that its flowers are fully double, and a much darker pink in color. They look more like pink pom-poms. Like all ornamental cherries, their bloom time is brief.

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 – A pair of pileated woodpeckers has been spotted along Lake Whitehurst near the end of Statuary Vista. They are large, spectacular, and have a very distinct call.

*Les Parks, Director of Horticulture*