

Horticultural Highlights – August 2025

Crapemyrtles – Garden-wide

Norfolk Botanical Garden has the only recognized collection of crapemyrtles (*Lagerstroemia* species and hybrids) in North America, and likely the world. Our climate is extremely well adapted to their growth, closely mimicking the climate of their native Asia. They have been an important part of our collection since Fred Huetten first encouraged area gardeners to plant them last century. Today they are the official tree of the city of Norfolk, and comprise over half of all street trees on city property.

Panicle Hydrangeas – Kaufman Hydrangea Garden, Flowering Arboretum, Garden-wide

Panicle hydrangeas (*Hydrangea paniculata*) came into their own in early July, about a month after other hydrangeas began blooming. The flowers usually emerge a fresh greenish white, mature to pure white, then age to a dusky pink later in the summer. Though a little past their peak now, panicle hydrangeas are still lovely and are aging gracefully.

Roses – Bicentennial Rose Garden

NBG has one of the largest rose gardens on the East Coast. Although they will bloom from mid-spring until the first good freeze, their peak bloom is typically around Mother's Day, and again in October when the weather cools. However, there is still a lot of color to enjoy.

Black-eyed Susans – Garden-wide

One of the most prolific genera of North American native plants is *Rudbeckia*, commonly referred to as black or brown-eyed Susan, or coneflower. There are many different species that do well in our climate and summer is their season to shine. Their flowers attract insect pollinators, and their ripe seeds offer many birds sustenance.

Joe-Pye Weed – Pollinator Garden, Baker Perennial Garden, Border Garden, and elsewhere

These tall robust plants (*Eutrochium* species) are a spectacular summer blooming native perennial. Their large mauve flowerheads are very attractive to butterflies, and later on, seed-eating birds will relish the ripe seeds. The plant's namesake was purported to be a native American herbal healer who used a variety of plants to treat illness, including Joe-Pye weed.

Fennel – Butterfly Garden

Roman soldiers were especially fond of fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) thinking it gave them strength, improved eyesight, had other healing properties, and it was also used as a symbol of victory. It seemed to have followed them all over Europe remaining long after their conquests were only subjects for history books. When Europeans settled North America, fennel was brought with them as well, and in some parts of the continent, fennel has escaped cultivation becoming a potentially invasive species, including here in Coastal Virginia. However, the butterflies love it, and you can see large stands of it in our Butterfly Garden, where our horticulturists keep a close eye on it.

Hardy Bananas – Sub-tropical Garden

While most banana species are tropical and will not survive our winters, they are still used extensively for summer plantings to add an exotic touch to landscapes. However, there are several hardy species that will survive our winters here in Coastal Virginia, going dormant at the first freeze and coming back again once temperatures warm again in spring.

Ornamental Grasses – Garden-wide

There are many ornamental grasses at NBG with multiple species represented. They are the perfect way to add texture to the landscape, and with a slight breeze they also add movement. Late in the summer many varieties are in full flower.

Rain Lilies – Admin Restrooms, NATO Hill, Conifer Garden

Unexpected surprises in the garden can be a good thing. Such is the case with rain lilies (*Zephyranthes* species and hybrids). For most of the summer they look like clumps of grass, but after a good rain, they send forth clusters of beautiful flowers. There are varieties that bloom white, shades of pink, orange, coral, and yellow – depending on the selection. Interestingly, it needs to be rain water, not irrigation, to trigger the bloom.

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.

Gordonia/Loblolly Bay – Flowering Arboretum

One of the Southeast's most underappreciated trees, Gordonia (*Gordonia lasianthus*) looks like a camellia on steroids when it is in bloom. In fact, it is a member of the same family as the more familiar camellia. In summer, beautiful white flowers cover the tree. Gordonia is largely evergreen, but sometimes a few leaves will turn a glossy red. They prefer full sun in consistently moist soil. Our Flowering Arboretum is home to the state champion.

Purple Hyacinth Beans – Tram Stops 5, 6, and 7

This annual (*Dolichos lablab*) is a beautiful vine with clusters of purple flowers, burgundy red stems, and purple seed pods. Inside the seed pods you will find clusters of black and white beans, like little sleeping panda cubs. This plant was grown by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello where it was considered an edible, but there are better beans for the table, especially since large quantities of this one is toxic! Better to admire than to ingest.

Hercules Club – Border Garden

Considered rare, this tree (*Zanthoxylum clava-herculis*) is native to Coastal Virginia. It gets its common name from the imposing thorns that cover its trunk. Other common names include toothache tree and tingle tongue. This is because it was traditionally used to dull tooth pain, and a chewed leaf does indeed make your tongue tingle. It is also a host plant for the giant swallowtail butterfly.

Butterfly House

In the NBG Butterfly House you can not only see a wide variety of native butterflies, but you can also see their caterpillars and chrysalises, learn which plants they like, and you can talk with knowledgeable volunteers and interns. You can also see why our butterfly house was voted the best in the country by readers of USA Today!

Bonsai Collection – Transition Garden

NBG has a unique bonsai collection that is managed by our in-house bonsai specialist, and 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 garden plants growing in our gardens or nursery.

Wildlife Watch – NBG is home to abundant wildlife, including a variety of snakes. While most here are non-venomous, we do have some you need to be very careful around. They usually head the other way when noisy humans are around, but sticking to the paths and not tormenting them are the best way to avoid a bad encounter.

Les Parks, Vice President of Horticulture