

Horticultural Highlights – September 2025

Sunflowers – WOW Grain Plain

This week's Instagram moment is in our World of Wonders Children's Garden. The annual sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) are in full bloom right now and are both colorful and very tall. While you are there, do not miss our new eco-sculpture *Watershed Tower* by Angela Haseltine Pozzi.

Spider Lily – Japanese Garden, Sunken Garden

These bright red flowers (*Lycoris radiata*) mysteriously appear from seemingly nowhere on leafless stalks every September. Their timing leads to another common name, hurricane lily, because they arrive during peak hurricane season. Once they finish blooming, the stalks wither, but later the foliage will emerge to be evergreen all winter, then when warm weather returns late next spring they disappear again.

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.

The Butterfly Maze – Butterfly Garden

Unlike other mazes made of corn or boxwood, ours is created using 'Northwind' switch grass (*Panicum virgatum* 'Northwind'). Right now, the grass is in full flower and the blades are taking on their fall color. It is a must-experience for kids and adults, especially on a breezy day when the grasses are dancing.

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 mid to late summer is their season to shine. Their flowers attract insect pollinators, and their ripe seeds offer many birds sustenance.

Devil's Walking Stick – Enchanted Forest

One look at the vicious thorn covered stems, and you will know why this woodland native (*Aralia spinosa*) is named the way it is. Earlier in the season it had frothy white flowers that attracted a wide variety of beneficial insects. Now its dark purple-black fruits are ripening, which berry-eating birds will relish. Later the foliage will turn an attractive golden yellow.

Hardy Ginger – Subtropical Garden

Gardeners in Coastal Virginia are fortunate enough to live in a climate where a variety of hardy gingers (*Hedychium* species) can grow. They bring any garden a touch of the tropics with their bold foliage and exotic flowers, some of which are quite fragrant. Late summer is the best time to see their gorgeous blooms.

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.

Firecracker Vine – Hummingbird Garden

While you are waiting for the tram, or for something from one of our food trucks, look on the purple arbor in the Hummingbird Garden. Right now, the firecracker vine (*Manettia cordifolia*) is in full bloom, attracting hummingbirds trying to get a few final meals in before flying to their winter homes. The red-orange flowers are the perfect color, and perfect shape to attract these busy little flyers.

Goldenrod – Garden-wide

With their golden yellow flowers, goldenrod (*Solidago* species) is one of early fall's signature plants. It is also one of North America's most prolific wildflowers, with 80 different native species. There are goldenrods for just about every garden niche, from sun to shade, wet or dry, salty or not. They are also amazing beneficial insect attractors, and many birds will relish the ripe seeds.

American Beautyberry – Pollinator Demonstration Garden

Clusters of colorful fruit adorn the branches of this native shrub (*Callicarpa americana*) every year in early fall, and they are the perfect shade of crayon-box-purple. Not only are they attractive to humans, but several bird species enjoy the ripe fruit. As an added bonus, the foliage has mosquito repelling properties

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 are 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! See it while you can, it closes at the end of the month.

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 – One of North America's most widely spread birds is the great blue heron. Anywhere there is water, even well inland, they can be found. Ours like to patrol the canal bank waiting for breakfast to swim by.

Les Parks, Vice President of Horticulture