

Horticultural Highlights – April 2026

Azaleas – Garden Wide

This iconic shrub is in full bloom right now, draping the Garden in an array of colors. There are many blooming now, and they should reach their peak in the middle of the month. While you are enjoying the azaleas, please remember to thank the ladies and gentlemen who cleared the wild brush that was here to plant them way back in 1938.

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.

Mayapple – Mirror Lake, Enchanted Forest, Garden-wide

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.

Coral Honeysuckle – Wildflower Meadow, Colonial Garden

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.

Chinese Ground Orchids – Japanese Garden

Most people think of orchids as something only suitable for a hothouse or a warm sunny window sill, but there are many that are quite hardy in the ground, offering spectacular spring blooms. The Chinese ground orchids (*Bletilla striata*) not only have beautiful exotic flowers, but their foliage is handsome too.

Japanese Hardy Orchid – Rhododendron Garden

This is another hardy orchid (*Calanthe striata*) that has striking clusters of bright yellow flowers that rise above pleated, nearly-evergreen foliage.

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.

Carolina Allspice – Fragrance Garden, Colonial Garden, and other places

This old-fashioned Southeastern native shrub goes by many different names depending on where you are from. It is known as sweetshrub, Eastern sweetshrub, Carolina allspice, sweet Betsy, sweet Bubby, and others. Confusing isn't it? This is why horticulturists stick with botanical names, in this case *Calycanthus floridus* – no matter where you are or what language you speak, botanical names are always the same. Regardless, this plant has dramatic dark red flowers that smell like very ripe fruit.

Florida Anise Tree – The Glade

Gardeners looking for an alternative to camellias and azaleas for evergreen screening in shady sites, may want to consider the Gulf Coast native anise tree (*Illicium floridanum*). They are easy to grow, the red spring flowers look like star fish, and the foliage smells of anise or licorice.

Red Buckeye – Flowering Arboretum, Enchanted Forest, Discovery Grove, 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.

Chinese Snowball Viburnum – The Border Garden

The large white 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. Right now, they are covered in thousands of blossoms.

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!

Camas/Quamash – Flowering Arboretum, Conifer Garden, Garden-wide

One of the last spring bulbs to bloom, *Camassia* usually have blue flowers. They are native to the Pacific Northwest, and members of the Lewis and Clark expedition learned to eat these from the Nez Pierce tribe in Idaho, who fed the starving men. However, the bulbs contain a carbohydrate which is not easily digested, especially if your system is not used to it, and double so if you gorge on them, which the members of the Corp of Discovery did. Captain William Clark recorded in his journal: "I found myself very unwell this morning owing, I presume, to the quantity of roots I had eaten yesterday..."

Golden Ragwort – Holly Garden, Camellia Allee, Admin Welcome Garden

This wonderful native perennial (*Packera aurea*) is a great solution for gardeners with troubling spots. It will grow in sun or shade, deer and rabbits leave it alone, it is great for beneficial pollinators, and it forms a groundcover so thick that weeds will not come up through it. If that's not enough, its bright yellow daisy-like flowers are quite beautiful.

Dove Tree – Flowering Arboretum

This rare tree (*Davidia involucrata*) is native to China, and unfortunately, it only blooms for a brief period in the spring. White wing-like bracts are elegantly showy and make it easy to see where the common name comes from. It is also referred to as handkerchief tree or laundry tree, but we think dove tree better suits our tree.

Bonsai Collection – Transition Garden

Our bonsai collection has recently come out of protective storage for the winter and is now on display in the Transition Garden. NBG has a unique 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 – We have been very fortunate that a trio of great horned owlets hatched in the Garden this spring. Keep your eyes peeled in the canopy as they learn to fly and learn to be owls.

Les Parks, Vice President of Horticulture