

Horticultural Highlights – May 2026

Roses – Bicentennial Rose Garden

Get out there, and get out there now! It is a riot of color and fragrance.

'Peggy Martin' Rose – Cobblestone Bridge

During Hurricane Katrina, Peggy Martin's New Orleans garden was flooded and remained under saltwater for several weeks. There were only 2 plants to survive, and one was this rose, a.k.a. The Hurricane Katrina rose. We have found it to be exceptionally vigorous, a long bloomer, and virtually disease free, but give her room – she grows where and how she wants.

Satsuki Azaleas – Airport Berm, Garden Wide

While most of the azaleas are past peak, the Satsuki group of azaleas are just getting started. 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.

Giant Century Plant – NATO Hill

Agaves often go by the name of century plant, which is a bit of a misnomer as they typically live only 10-20 years. Agaves are monocarpic, meaning they die after flowering, but not before going out with a grand show, and leaving behind a litter of "pups" to take its place. An *Agave salmiana* is about to bloom on NATO Hill like a gigantic, dramatic, mutant stalk of asparagus.

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.

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 Hot Poker – Butterfly Garden, Baker Perennial Garden, NATO Tower, and elsewhere

This South African plant (*Kniphofia* species and hybrids) sends up tall dramatic spikes of orange, red, yellow, to white flowers, often with several different colors at the same time. They prefer full sun in very well drained soil, attract hummingbirds, and they make a great cut flower as well.

Japanese Snowbell – Discovery Grove, Flowering Arboretum

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

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.

'Skylands' Spruce – Conifer Garden

Spruces are typically considered poor choices for Southern gardens, being unable to acclimate to our humidity and heat, especially our high night time temperatures. However, 'Skylands' (*Picea orientalis* 'Skylands') seems to be more tolerant, maybe not happy, but tolerant. Regardless, its bright golden yellow spring foliage might make you happy.

Southern Magnolia – Flowering Arboretum

This is one of the classic trees (*Magnolia grandiflora*) of Southern gardens. Large white flowers are open now, and they have an intoxicating fragrance. Evergreen, native, wind-resistant, they are easy to grow in full sun to partial shade. However, they can be very messy. Even though they are evergreen, the leaves will drop, just not all at once, and they take a very long time to decompose. If the branches are allowed to remain low to the ground this will hide many of those fallen leaves.

Coral Honeysuckle – Wildflower Meadow, Butterfly 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.

Pitcher Plants – Va. Native Plant Garden, WOW

Looking as if they are from another planet, these carnivorous plants (*Sarracenia* species and hybrids) have a sinister architecture. Insects looking for an easy meal are lured into the pitcher-like structure of the plant. Once inside they find the sides are lined with downward facing hairs that make it nearly impossible for the insects to leave the plant. Eventually they fall into a pool of digestive juices at the bottom where the plant will make a meal of them.

Peonies – Border Garden, Baker Perennial Garden

Catch them while you can, these old-fashioned favorites will not last long once high heat arrives.

Milk Thistle – Butterfly Garden

Typically valued more for its medicinal properties, milk thistle (*Silybum marianum*) is also very ornamental with its tall purple flowers and mottled white and green foliage. The butterflies also find it very attractive. However, it is considered invasive in many areas, but we have found it manageable, and it is not listed as invasive in Virginia, at least not yet. We are keeping an eye on it.

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 a number of turtle species. At this time of year, you can see many searching for mates, looking for places to lay eggs, investigating new food sources, and searching for new territories to call home.

Les Parks, Vice President of Horticulture