

Horticultural Highlights – October 2026

American Beautyberry – Pollinator Demonstration Garden, Virginia Native Plant 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

Mexican Bush Sage – Kitchen Garden, Admin Welcome Garden, and other places

One of the benefits of living in gardening zone 8 is that Mexican bush sage (*Salvia leucantha*) is hardy here, and not an annual like it is further north. It usually starts blooming in September with velvety purple flowers accented by its silvery foliage. It does best in full sun, and it must have good drainage, especially in winter. Though it will take the occasional drought, it does best with even moisture.

Flowering Dogwood – Garden-wide

Among many other admirable attributes, this tree (*Cornus florida*) is the very first tree to take on fall foliage color. Weeks before other trees even consider changing, flowering dogwood starts to turn shades of red and burgundy. It is a marker of things to come.

Common Persimmon – Wildflower Meadow, Garden-wide

This tree (*Diospyros virginiana*) is a Coastal Virginia native with nutritious fruit for wildlife and humans alike, you just need to wait until it is ripe. It is the host plant for several moth species, insect pollinators are attracted to its late spring flowers, and mammals and birds enjoy the ripe fruit. Tough and durable, it withstands whatever conditions Mother Nature gives it, including drought, salt spray, and flooding. It also has attractive fall foliage and distinctively unusual bark.

'Victory' Pyracantha – Border Garden

Dripping with red-orange fruit, the ungainly pyracantha (*Pyracantha koidzumii* 'Victory') can't decide if it wants to be a shrub or a vine. The birds don't care, they just bide their time waiting for the fruit to ever so slightly ferment. Once it crosses that threshold, then an avian feast begins. Not only do they relish the fruit, but pyracantha makes for good shelter being evergreen and thorny, protecting the birds from both cold winds and predators.

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.

Purple Hyacinth Beans – Tram Stop 6

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.

Dahlias – Cut Flower Garden

From the mountains of Mexico and Central America comes one of the showiest flowers. Dahlias come in just about any color but blue, and can be either single or double, small or large, some very large. They typically prefer a more temperate summer than we normally have, but they can wait the heat out and when the season starts to turn, they put forth their colors.

Winterberry Holly – Holly Garden, Discovery Grove

Many hollies are known for their evergreen prickly foliage, but not our native winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*). In the fall the foliage turns a golden yellow before falling, though the branches are not bare. They are covered in clusters of bright red, showy fruit which usually persists until January when overwintering birds will make a meal of them.

Loofah Sponge – Gourd Tunnel at Grain and Hops Garden

Covered with bright yellow flowers and large cucumber-like fruit, this annual vine (*Luffa aegyptiaca*) is currently living its best life, seemingly oblivious to the coming winter cold which will kill it. Making hay while the sun shines! The cucumber resemblance is no coincidence, they are both in the same family along with squash and pumpkins.

'White Cloud Muhly Grass' – Canal Bank near Virginia Native Plant Garden

Gardeners are likely familiar with pink muhly grass (*Muhlenbergia capillaris*) that colors the early fall garden with misty puffs of pink flowers. However, the white version (*Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud') is just as stunning, if not more so. It tends to hold its flowers a little higher, and they tend to last a little longer.

Blue Mist Flower – Flowering Arboretum, Border Garden, Garden-wide

This perennial (*Conoclinium coelestinum*), also known as hardy ageratum, is one of Coastal Virginia's most prolific wildflowers. Purple-blue flowers open in August and will bloom until mid-fall attracting butterflies, bees, and other pollinators.

'Jindai' Tartarian Aster – Butterfly Garden, Matson Garden, Baker Perennial Garden

This aster (*Aster tataricus* 'Jindai') is a dramatic fall bloomer with lavender-blue, daisy-like petals surrounding golden centers on tall stalks. Despite being an Asian native, Tartarian asters attract loads of local insect pollinators, plus birds will eat its seeds. It is also quite vigorous and small plant will soon obtain great size, but without being invasive.

Encore Azaleas – NATO Triangle and Garden-wide

We all recognize azaleas as one of the icons of the spring garden, but Encore azaleas have been bred to bloom in the fall and summer as well. Other than bloom time, they are the same as most other azaleas.

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 or adults, especially on a breezy day when the grasses are dancing.

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 pileated woodpeckers, North America's largest remaining woodpecker species. Colorful and loud, they are a real presence in the Garden. They forage for insects on the trunks of many large trees here. Yet one more reason to save trees.

Les Parks, Vice President of Horticulture