

# The President's Corner



Dear Friends,

Fall is upon us, and with it, for me, comes the season of giving thanks. I would like us all to pause a bit in our busy lives and think about all the amazing ecological services that native plants provide. Seriously. Please take a minute, go outside, and look around. Let us give thanks for all that native plants do for us.

More than 20 years ago, two botanists proposed the term 'plant blindness' to describe the inability of people to notice plants and/or appreciate their significance. A while back, we had a botanist who grew up in west Philadelphia speak at a NPSNJ conference – as a kid, he said that if anyone in his community thought about plants at all, then all plants fell into 2 categories: lawn and not lawn (with an optional and seasonal 3rd category of Christmas trees). We all laughed as he told this story, but he was making a very important point. So many people do not think about plants at all – they take them for granted. As folks are becoming more aware of the importance of our own role in the environment, I believe that they are also becoming more aware of the importance of native plants, and how management decisions in spaces large and small can have major consequences.

So what do native plants do for us? What ecological services do they provide? Certainly, they produce oxygen and clean the air – the very air we breathe! They stabilize our soil and sand dunes, both filtering water and preventing erosion. They sequester carbon and hold water. They cool our soil and our communities. They provide nesting habitat (along with nesting material) for birds and other animals, and food for wildlife large and small: think of the squirrels and blue jays feasting on acorns, birds and mice eating a vast array of insects and fruits, as well as the tiny insects



of all sorts whose lives are inextricably intertwined with the native host plants upon which they (and their young) must feed. Plants provide not only insect food, but habitat: butterflies, moths and other insects overwintering attached to stems, wrapped in leaves, nestled in the leaf mulch at the base of plants, or inside the hollow winter stems of herbaceous perennials. Even as plants die or drop their leaves in fall, they provide wildlife habitat and natural mulch, conserving water, cooling the soil, and as they decompose, returning nutrients and organic matter to the soil. At the end of the day, they simply beautify our spaces; green spaces are good for our wellbeing.

The Native Plant Society of New Jersey's fall conference this year is entitled 'Native Plants : Sustaining & Restoring Life'. We hope you'll be able to join us on November 5th for this virtual conference where our wonderful lineup of speakers will touch on some of these ecological services and the wonders of native plants. In the meantime, maybe go outside and thank native plants for all they do.

All the best,

Randi V. Wilfert Eckel, PhD

# Rhododendron maximum

By Kazys Varnelis

When people ask me for recommendations for shrubs, they generally stipulate that they be evergreen, have a profusion of flowers, grow large and dense, thrive in the shade, and be inexpensive. All this is a tall order, but not too tall for our native white-flowering *Rhododendron maximum*, the Rose-Bay Rhododendron. While our state has other members of the genus *Rhododendron* (rhodo is Greek for Rose and dendro indicates that it is a shrub), these are azaleas, setting intensely beautiful flowers on smaller deciduous shrubs.

*Stick with nursery-grown varieties raised in pots as opposed to wild-harvested giants.*

As with any plant, consider the habitat the plant needs. In the case of rhododendrons, start with a soil test (<https://njaes.rutgers.edu/soil-testing-lab/how-to.php>). This plant's love of acid comes from its role as a mainstay of forest understories where soils are acidic. They will struggle in alkaline soils. In the 1970s my parents bought property near a hemlock forest filled with rhododendrons. Previous owners had planted rhododendrons as foundation plantings, but no matter how much synthetic "Miracid" fertilizer my father applied, the plants struggled: leaves sickly yellow, branches spindly. Later, we discovered the concrete foundation leached alkalinizing lime into the soil making it difficult for the plants to take up nutrients.

Stick with nursery-grown varieties raised in pots as opposed to wild-harvested giants. A plant in a three to five gallon pot costs \$30-40, while a six foot bush will cost you upwards of

\$200. Smaller specimens can be easily planted by one person and the provenance of wild-harvested rhododendrons is a mystery, which is rarely good. Finally, although the immediate satisfaction of a full-sized bush is tempting, inside the burlap root balls the root system has usually been seriously cut back. This is a recipe for decline. I mistakenly planted a number of large \$350 rhododendrons to create a hedgerow blocking out my neighbor's yard. Half of them died. As parts died off, I pruned them back, leaving little of their former bushiness intact. The hedgerow is now a straggling collection of shoots. Meanwhile, \$30 nursery-grown rhododendrons I planted two years ago are thriving, and ones that I planted four years ago are as big as the ones I purchased for so much more at the same time.

Rhododendrons do need adequate watering during establishment and drought and, because they are evergreen, that means year-round care. We often have dry spells for weeks on end in the winter, when the air is already drier. When the ground is frozen, roots have trouble taking up water from the soil. Cold, dry winds force rhododendron leaves to curl to prevent water from evaporating and while this strategy can be effective, there is no guarantee without adequate water. Giving rhododendrons supplemental water when the soil isn't frozen can help the leaves make it through the winter. Although leaves are apparently somewhat toxic to deer, in the winter deer seek out seemingly unpalatable things. Winter bi-weekly spraying with non-toxic, food-based deer repellants such as Deer Out and the much fouler Liquid Fence prevents the majority of deer predation.



\$30---2 year old nursery-grown rhododendron



\$350---scrawny hedgerow



*When Rhododendrons get leggy, you can heavily prune them in March, taking them down a foot or two from the ground. Just prune above a dormant bud.*

# Saturday Morning Poetry with Ann Wallace

Native Plant Society of  
New Jersey, Hudson County  
Chapter

October 2, 2022

The Hudson Chapter launched a thought-provoking series on Instagram this summer, bringing nature and the arts together. Saturday Morning Poetry with Ann Wallace features a nature-inspired poem each weekend, with a live reading and interview with the poet on Instagram later in the week. In the livestreams, Wallace, a Jersey City-based poet and English professor, engages in conversation—often funny, sometimes sad, but always reflective—with the poets on writing, literally or metaphorically, the natural world. As Wallace explains, “In our weekly conversations with poets who are inspired by nature, we invite people to slow down, observe the world around them more closely, sink into its rhythms and mysteries, and reflect on what role we wish to play in the environment.”

Indeed, a recurring theme of the series is that when we shine a lens on the life around us, whether through the smart phone cameras we all carry in our pockets now or through the language of poetry, we are likely to respect, care for, and even love that which we are seeing. And, as this summer’s poets have shown us time and again, we may just see ourselves reflected back in the lens.

*“...we invite people to slow down, observe the world around them more closely, sink into its rhythms and mysteries, and reflect on what role we wish to play in the environment.”*

Saturday Morning Poetry has included poets from across the country, ranging from emerging talent to well-known authors. Indeed, the diversity of talent and career paths has been one of the most exciting elements of Saturday Morning Poetry: in the space of a month, the

audience might hear from beloved naturalist writer Julie Zickefoose sharing an unpublished poem about a butterfly in danger, mourn with Jersey City poet and journalist Theta Pavis as she remembers her mother’s hand in her garden, listen to photographer and musician Rachel Mackow discuss poetry and collecting, and find delight with best-selling writer Ross Gay as he reads a wedding poem written in a community orchard. Other featured poets include Jeannie Roberts, Lopamudra Basu, Christina Kelly, Hara Rola, Rachel Mackow, Thomas E. Frank, award-winning poet Maggie Smith, beloved author Barbara Kingsolver, and actress and bird ambassador Lili Taylor.

Saturday Morning Poetry is produced by Ann Wallace @annwallace409 and NPSNJ Hudson County Chapter co-leader Kim Correro @KimCorrero. The featured poems and videos of the live conversations can all be found on the Hudson County chapter’s Instagram page: @npsnjhudsoncounty.



# Florid Folklore is Gold



By Hara Rola  
NPSNJ Member and  
E-News Co-Editor

Goldenrod, once considered a weed, has become the “golden girl” of the autumn flowers as gardeners now include it in their flower beds for its bright yellow color. This hardy perennial herb is in the genus *Solidago* and of the family *Asteraceae*. There are more than 100 species of Goldenrod in North America. Its brilliant, almost fluorescent, flowers bloom from late summer into early fall. It grows wild in many areas and can easily show up in one’s garden as a welcome gift from nature.

Goldenrod is not particular about the type of soil it inhabits but does best in dry sunny areas. Few pests attack it and it’s the “El Dorado” for bees, Monarch butterflies, other species of butterflies, beetles, moths, wasps and flies that love its nectar. And they busily swarm all over it as I have witnessed in my own garden. It provides them with a substantial final fall feast that they crave as the temperature chills down and other perennials are no longer blooming.

A sturdy adaptable native plant, Goldenrod has a long history in North America. And that history has

been intertwined with blossoms of folklore that are just as colorful as the plant itself.

Whether one believes the lore or not, Goldenrod may possibly be the treasure its reputed to harbor through its support of pollinating insects and for being a hardy, beautiful component of a native garden. Its genus, *Solidago*, comes from the Latin, *solida* meaning ‘whole’ and *ago* meaning ‘to make.’ I would say it has made my own garden whole with beauty, color and life. In fact, my garden is overflowing with Fireworks goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*) and Tall goldenrod (*Solidago altissima*). And I’m hoping they are a sign of great things to come!

#### Resources:

*Goldenrod: The Wildflower with a Heart of Gold*, Dawn Combs, 9/27/19, mothergardener.com.

*Goldenrod is a Golden Gift of Autumn*, Pat Smith, 9/28/16, newarkadvocate.com.

Folklore Thursday: Floral Folklore-Goldenrod, Emily, 8/24/17, groweatgift.com.

Goldenrod Legends and Lore, Sharon Brown, 11/13/12, davesgarden.com.

## A few golden nuggets of lore about this valuable perennial

- Abundant Goldenrod is thought to indicate a hidden spring or hidden treasure.
- If it starts growing near your home, you could be onto a winning streak.
- In many cultures, the gold flowers hold meaning associated with wealth, prosperity and happiness.
- It has been used to represent encouragement and growth.
- When the flower is given in times of loss and grief, it’s meant to be a sign of positivity and support.
- It has also been seen as a sign of good luck and good fortune. (I would say that the pollinators that forage upon it would agree with the good fortune part.)
- Goldenrod has been linked with sun symbolism due to the flowers’ warm yellow color.
- The flowers are often used for wedding decorations due to their symbolic association with new beginnings.

# The New NPSNJ Web site

By Kazys Varnelis

In June, Millie Ling and I transitioned the NPSNJ.org Web site to WordPress, a modern free and open-source content-management system used by millions of sites from Whitehouse.gov to Vogue.com to patsuttonwildlifegarden.com.

Employing WordPress allows us to more rapidly update the site and to increase its capabilities through the use of extensions. Apart from a new front-page, we have a new events page (<https://npsnj.org/events/>) where you can see all of the upcoming events at a glance as a list or as a calendar.

In-person events now have Google maps integrated and you can add a subscription to all NPSNJ events to your Google, Apple (icalendar), or Outlook calendars via the “Sub-

scribe to Calendar” button at the bottom. If you do that, make sure to have the calendar refresh daily, not weekly, as we frequently add events.

We have improved our membership, donation, and newsletter subscription forms so that there is no longer a need to go off-site with Paypal and payments are instead processed via Stripe.

Our old Web site, developed by Millie over decades contains a huge wealth of knowledge and most of it has been moved to the new site, including:

**A manual on how to build rain gardens:** <https://npsnj.org/native-plants/rain-gardens/>

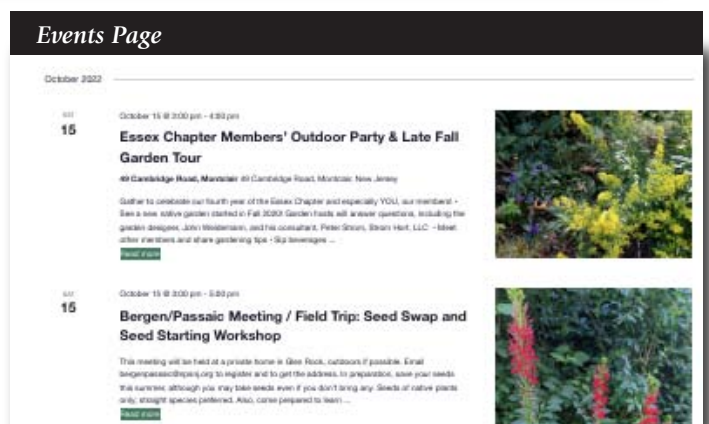
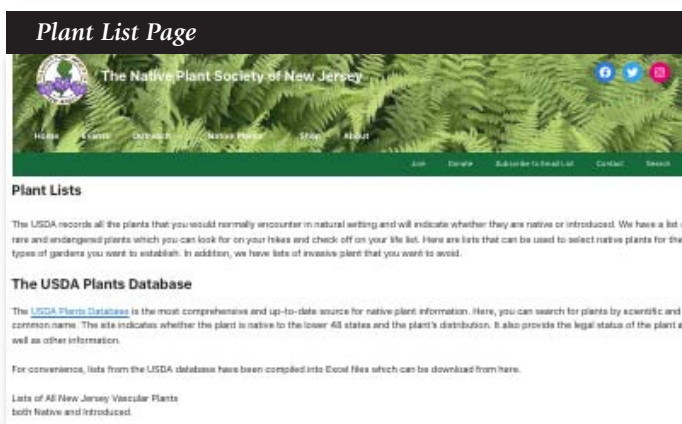
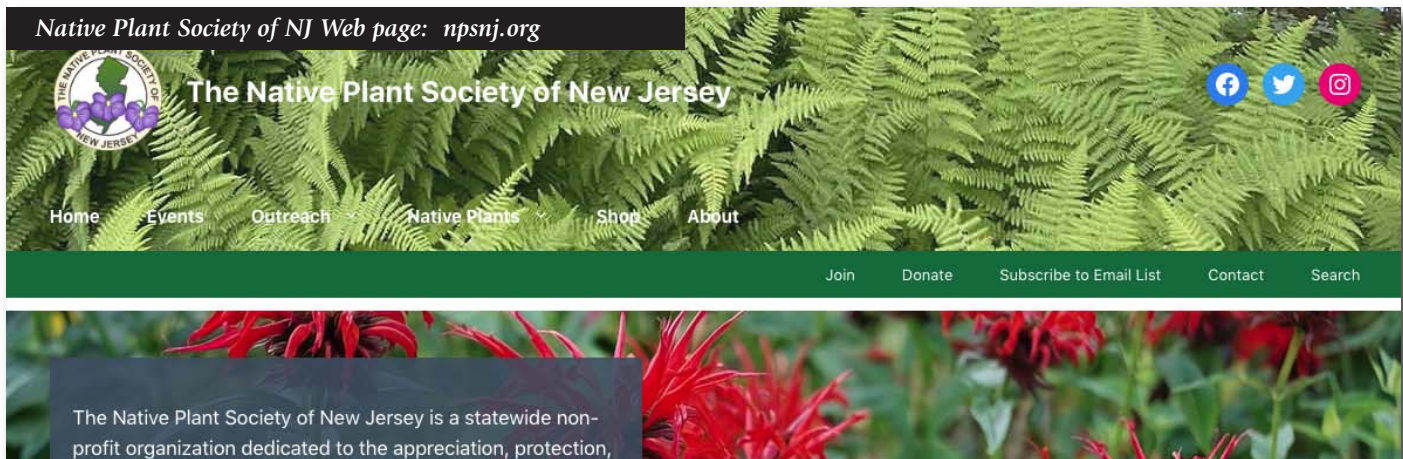
**List of New Jersey native plants** (<https://npsnj.org/native-plants/where-to-buy-natives/plant-lists/>)

**Recordings of webinars** (<https://npsnj.org/native-plants/all-about-natives/webinar-recordings/>)

If you can't find something that you used to be able to find, do try the

**Archive of the old web site:** <http://old.npsnj.org>

We have plans for more, from member-exclusive features to on-site RSVPs for events (no more google forms!). If you have experience with WordPress, we can use your help as we move forward with the site. Contact us at [webmaster@npsnj.org](mailto:webmaster@npsnj.org)





## Partridge Pea, *Chamaecrista fasciculata*

John Suskewich  
*Essex Chapter*

Partridge pea, *Chamaecrista fasciculata*, is a charming yellow-flowered foot-high northeast US native annual. Like several other legumes, the stems perform the neat trick of collapsing when touched, which can make little kids, and some adults like me, saucer-eyed.

This is a very important pollinator plant, and a host for the cloudless sulphur butterfly, a beauty. Just after sunrise, bees begin to abound on partridge pea and the sound of their hum and buzz in the early morning is like an orchestra composed entirely of zithers. The seeds make a meal for game birds such as quail and, presumably, partridges. The delicate, blue-green fern-like foliage is another reason to grow this plant.



Cloudless Sulphur *Phoebis sennae*



## Plant Electric

Fireworks Goldenrod  
pollinator's heaven  
source of food  
place of shelter  
is blooming now...  
quiet explosion  
of bright yellow  
star-like florets  
nearly countless  
looking fluorescent  
in full sunlight...  
fluttering visitors  
touch down upon  
lit up rays  
delicate blossoms  
bursting forth  
that extend  
in all directions  
commencing  
the last light show  
of summer

Hara L. Rola 2021