

# Native Nuisances and Native Treasures



By Pamela J. Harper

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PAMELA HARPER shares her experiences with native plants through her many years of gardening at her Sea-ford, Virginia property in sandy, moist, enriched, well drained soil.

There is no intrinsic difference between native and nonnative plants, there are saints and sinners in each category, and which is which depends a good deal on soil, site, and locality. Even avid supporters of native plants would draw the line at poison ivy; beyond that, it is seldom admitted that native plants can threaten less robust species, in the garden or in the wild. I was astonished to see pokeweed listed as a desirable component of meadow gardens; this is by far my worst weed (well, equal perhaps with chickweed); I pull out hundreds each year and truckloads have gone to the garbage dump. Perhaps it behaves differently in cooler regions, but I doubt it; I saw it naturalizing far from home in the Oxford Botanic Garden. I'll admit to being tempted when a variegated form was introduced, but common sense prevailed.

## Vines

Aside from pokeweed (*Phytolacca americana*), the worst of my native nuisances are vines: smilax, Virginia creeper, maypop (*Passiflora incarnata*), trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*) and the hybrid 'Madame Galen', red- and yellow-flowered morning glories, and, the worst of the lot, crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*). A friend found this in a local wood and gave me a start. It has run extensively underground and, in spite of frequent attack with spade, mattock, and Roundup®, will probably be here long after I am gone.

The jury is still out with the native wisteria (*Wisteria floribunda*), often suggested as an alternative to the alien *W. sinensis*. Many years ago, I planted the white form; it spread rampantly underground and had to be removed. When *W. f.* 'Amethyst Falls' was introduced, I was tempted anew and what a sight this is when hung with numerous stubby bright blue inflorescences. It is high up in a tree, it trails over the ground, and recently new growth popped up the other side of a mulched path, many feet away from the parent plant. In short, it has exactly the same potential for invasiveness as the Asian species—if on a somewhat smaller scale.

The treasures among native vines are the red honeysuckles, *Lonicera sempervirens*, and the yellow-flowered *L. s.* 'John Clayton' found in a local woods. The native climbing hydrangea, *Decumaria barbara*, did not bloom until it had climbed high up in a tree, a tree that came down during hurricane Isabel. Now it rambles over the stump but does not bloom. It cannot compete in pleasure given with the nonnative *Schizophragma hydrangeoides* 'Moonlight'.

## Shrubs

There are many treasures among the shrubs I grow, not least among them the popular oakleaf hydrangea, *H. quercifolia* (especially *H. q.* 'Snowflake') and *Hydrangea arborescens* (especially *H. a.* 'Annabelle', surely among the most easy to please and widely adaptable shrubs).

It is worth noting, however, that when my garden was flooded with brackish water, the oakleaf hydrangea was completely wiped out, whereas *H. macrophylla* emerged unscathed. Another native shrub high on my list of desirable plants is *Rhododendron austrinum*, its selections and hybrids.

A prime example of "right plant, right place" is the saltbush, *Baccharis halimifolia*, that adorns the brackish marsh edging my property. It put itself there and requires no help from me, although I do occasionally cut it back when it begins to look leggy. Undistinguished for most of the year, it plays a prominent role in the late summer and early autumn

when thistledown seeds envelop the 5' bushes in a white cloud, the silken parachutes glistening in the sun as light breezes waft them off on their travels. A few seedlings need to be removed from the area immediately above the marsh, but this is a minor chore. In this higher, drier area grows the perennial sea mallow, *Kosteletzkya virginica*. This is a charmingly dainty mallow with inch-wide flowers of



*Veric astrum virginicum*

a soft translucent pink; the display is over by early afternoon but starts anew the next day.

I've encountered few thugs among the shrubs I grow, but many natives are by nature thicket forming and may quickly spread beyond their allotted space. This was the case with *Itea virginica* 'Henry's Garnet', planted in the only reliably moist sunny part of my garden. By contrast *I. v.* 'Sarah Eve',

with reddish buds, planted in a dry place where red cedars have first call on any moisture, needed thinning back only after some twenty years. So, tough love was applied to ‘Henry’s Garnet’, now relocated in a much drier spot.

I grow several nonnative species of euonymus and, yes, I do have to remove some unwanted seedlings, but not nearly as many as those of the native *Euonymus americanus*, which sows around among azaleas in a lightly shaded part of my garden. Thus far, I have found it worth the effort for the sake of the bright fruiting show in autumn, when scarlet seeds drip from within an orange frame, giving it the common name Hearts-a-Bustin’. It is tolerant of poor soil and summer drought.



*Baptisia arachnifera*

## Perennials

My worst perennial weed is *Viola sororia*, including *V. s.* ‘Priceana’, the Confederate violet. They are clytrogamous (forming seed capsules underground), so deadheading does no good, and plants have to be dug out. On mild days, I enjoy such spells of weeding, comfortably ensconced on a mat, trowel in hand. However, I wish where I’ve weeded would STAY weeded, which is never the case with this violet. In any case, more comes in with every truckload of compost. The one violet I covet is the beguiling little bird’s foot violet, *V. pedata*, especially the bicolor form, but this has repeatedly shown its disdain for my garden. Plants I’ve bought have been pathetically small; perhaps starting with a larger clump might work.

Whether an aggressive perennial is an asset or a nuisance depends somewhat on the manner in which it spreads, and also on where one puts it. The yearly visit of Virginia bluebells is welcome but brief, leaving a large bare patch. It works best in a woodland situation, where low-branched trees leaf out later or, in more open woodland, interplanted with herbaceous ferns. I’ve found a similar home for the much decried Spanish bluebells by planting them under *Cornus kousa* which, when it leafs out, hides the dying foliage and

flower stems. Virginia bluebells would work here, too.

*Coreopsis verticillata* (mine is the cultivar ‘Zagreb’, said to be a slower spreader, but my experience does not bear this out) quickly forms large, dense patches in a sunny place and sandy soil, yet it does not wander here, there, and everywhere, and pieces are easily sliced off with a sharp spade to keep it in check. Because the outer growth is the youngest and healthiest, I will

occasionally remove a section from the middle to rejuvenate the patch. Once I could grow the lovely *C. v.* ‘Moonbeam’, but since I “improved” the acid sandy soil, I no longer can—there’s a lesson there

somewhere. Beebalm, *Monarda* spp., by contrast, wanders loosely everywhere, infiltrating its neighbors, and this has been rendered even more vigorous in the enriched soil. I’ve removed most of them, cleaving only to ‘Blue Stocking’ (*M.* ‘Blaustrump’) for old times sake and remembering the friend who gave it to me.

Spread by seed can be a bigger problem. For years I enjoyed the late summer display of *Solidago rugosa* ‘Fireworks’, giving up on it only when it repeatedly infiltrated a shrub where it could be eradicated only by the tedious process of painting it with Roundup®. Ironweed, *Vernonia noveboracensis*, sealed its fate by sowing into the middle of a treasured native azalea. I’ll miss the autumn display of purple flowers lofted well above neighboring plants, but for most of the year, it is an undistinguished species. On trial, instead, is a species of ironweed more recently introduced, the lower and denser *V. lettermannii*, with fine-cut foliage similar to that of *Amsonia hubrichtii*, topped in late summer by tufts of purple flowers, but mainly a foliage plant. I value foliage more and flowers less with each year that goes by.

Asters with small white flowers keep appearing in my garden. I’ve never

been sure of the species, but all have been a nuisance. Aster treasures include the three forms of *Symphotrichum oblongifolium*, which flower in sequence—first ‘Raydon’s Favorite’, then ‘October Skies’, and finally, very late in the year, ‘Fanny’s Aster’. I’ve long enjoyed *Eurybia divaricatus*, a denizen of dry woods; this makes a neat weed-suppressing groundcover topped in late summer with sprays of small white flowers. Recently I removed the old red cedars providing overhead shade (and severe root competition), rendering that spot much sunnier. The aster doesn’t seem to mind. Selected forms of *Arum italicum* come up through it in the fall, lasting into April.

*Aquilegia canadensis* (in mostly sun) and the woods poppy *Stylophorum diphyllum* (in light shade) are among the most joyous sights of spring. I do not want to part with them, but oh, my, do they spread around. Each year I resolve to be more punctilious about cutting them back before the seed ripens; perhaps this year I’ll actually do it.

A discussion of ferns and grasses would need an article to itself, so I’ve chosen just one for dishonorable mention. Wild oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) is a grass that delights children. Seldom static, always graceful, the well-spaced dangling spikelets of the inflorescence waft in the slightest breeze and their color changes as the season progresses, from green to rust, sometimes with a hint of purple. As a child I knew it as “Falling Tears”. Although sometimes called northern sea oats, it is not a seashore plant.



*Baptisia bracteata* var. *leucophaca*

“Thrives in sun or shade ... deep rooted ... easily grown from seed ... self-sows” writes one advocate, but these are qualities that ultimately led to its eviction from my garden. Seedlings are “easily scratched out when young,” writes Rick

Darke; so they are, or so they would be if concentrated in one open spot and not dispersed all around the garden, tangled in with other plants.

Baptisias have long been one of my passions and you’ll find them scattered in sunny spots in several parts of my

garden, some in sunken containers while being evaluated. I'll mention just a few of the less common kinds. Sandy soil of low fertility suits baptisias, but they'll grow in most sunny places that don't get overly wet. Nowadays, I select for the compact form, *Baptisia australis* var. *minor*. When taller ones flop around, I cut them back by half, sometimes more, resulting in a quick flush of new growth (but no repeat bloom) and a neater plant for the rest of the season. Seed-grown plants of *B. a.* var. *minor* vary in height, size of leaves, and flower color. At its best, it is compact, with lacy foliage and bright blue flowers.

Visitors often mistake *Baptisia perfoliata* for a young eucalyptus, and that is one of its common names, where it grows in the wild. The yellow flowers in the center of the leaves are modestly attractive, but this is essentially a foliage plant. *B. bracteata* var. *leucophaea*,

a favorite of mine, is a front-of-the-border plant, barely 15" high, with arching inflorescences of creamy yellow flowers. This one has been slow to mature and very sparing of seed. "What's THAT?" asks many a visitor,



*Cardamine dissecta*

looking at the intensely silvery foliage of *B. arachnifera*. I find this one hard to keep, and voles have reduced a group of three to a single survivor, which may or may not be there next year. I've sown seed and hope for the best.

Some baptisias (by no means all) self-sow, the seedlings usually emerging close to the parent plant. When this is a good form or hybrid, I pot them up and grow them on, and by this means have acquired some lovely hybrids worthy of introduction. I'm a good propagator (from cuttings, less so from seed), but with baptisias, I've had close to total failure, with fewer than a dozen successes over ten years, and none of my loveliest hybrid—a compact little bush with dark wiry stems and flowers of an exquisite color blend, white with flushes of lemon yellow and storm-cloud purple. Cuttings root with ease, but, come the next spring, all that is in the pot is roots—no growing bud. Putting them out in the ground rather than keeping them in frames

through winter hasn't helped. I've called this one 'Misty', but don't hold your breath waiting for it to become available. Suggestions that might lead to successful propagation would be most welcome. Hybrids have to be grown from cuttings; seedlings from 'Misty' have given me some pretty plants but none resembling their parent.

*Tradescantia virginiana* can be a self-sowing nuisance where soil, site, and climate suit it. This also applies to many of the named kinds grouped under *T. Andersoniana* Group. Instead, I recommend searching out a species I was given more than four decades ago as *T. hirta* (might it more properly be *T. hirsutiflora*?). This has proved a reliable long-lived plant, easily divided but still growing only in the three places where I have put it. It is adaptable but has shown a preference for soil that does not dry out and with some protection from afternoon sun. It tends to bloom in spring, take a summer rest, and then bloom again later in the year.

Fall is my favorite time of year and one of the prettiest local sights is hardy ageratium, *Conoclinium coelestinum* (syn. *Eupatorium coelestinum*), growing in roadside ditches. I'm content to enjoy it there, it spread too rapidly in my garden. Heavier soil and a colder climate would probably control the exuberance of this pretty native. A recent introduction, *Conoclinium dissectum* (syn. *Eupatorium greggii*), or Texas ageratium, is said to be better behaved, and I'll probably add it to my spring orders.

### Favorite Plants

And so, to my greatest treasures—there's probably no such thing as the perfect plant, but these come close.

*Cardamine dissecta* (syn. *Dentaria multifida*) is the daintiest toothwort I've encountered, a woodland gem, easy to grow, yet surprisingly rare in gardens, perhaps because it is so ephemeral that few see and covet it. This woodland gem

is mere inches high with a spread of about a foot, the lacy foliage bedizened with white flowers of typical toothwort form. It reappears faithfully each year, stays for about two weeks, then quietly goes to rest, no mess, and no fuss. The only care I've given it is an occasional topdressing of compost and the removal of other self-sown perennials that might crowd it out, notably *Helleborus foetidus*, which is, I suppose, an example of an alien plant threatening a native. Controlling such situations is what gardeners do.

Spring brings a plethora of flowers but by mid-June, just when northern borders are coming into their own, there's a bit of a dearth in my garden. That's why I value so highly two sterling performers that help fill the gap. Success with baby's breath, *Gypsophila* spp., has eluded me, but never mind, *Euphorbia corollata* is similarly cloud-like when in bloom and has lived contentedly in the place I chose for it, so many years ago, on a low bank, with sun for more than half the day. It emerges late in spring and for years (until voles dined on the bulbs), I had it underplanted with *Tulipa clusiana* 'Cynthia'. This area looks very bare in winter, and I'd like to see it clothed with a low wintergreen ground cover, that would live in harmony with the euphorbia and discourage the chickweed that tries so hard to fill the groundcover role. Suggestions, please.

Culver's root, *Veronicastrum virginicum*, may look droopy during extended summer heat and drought, but it is otherwise a self-sufficient plant, needing only infrequent division, valued for both extended bloom and spirelike form.



*Spigelia marilandica* 'Little Redhead'

I have three forms: the white 'Alba', pale lavender 'Lavendelturm', and bluish

'Fascination'. I discarded one, seed grown, of washed-out pink, and I covet one I saw in the long borders at Wisley called 'Pointed Finger' ('Bekoning Finger' would be more apt for the crooked multiple spires), for which I've yet to find a US source. In my coastal bit of Virginia, summer rain tends to come in torrential downpours that knock the flower-heavy stems of Culver's root to

the ground and so, in early June, it gets the “Chelsea chop”, the stems being cut back by about half; this results in more, but shorter spires of bloom, more candelabrum than spire perhaps.

Indian pink, *Spigelia marilandica*, can become invasive but seldom does. If you are growing such small and vulnerable plants as dwarf trilliums or hepaticas, then I recommend that you plant Indian pink well away from them, at least the larger form which is, where well-suited, a colonizer. Brilliantly clad in red and yellow flowers above a background of green leaves, Indian pink is one of nature’s most gorgeous creations outside of the tropics. Decades have passed since Woodlanders Nursery introduced it. Other nurseries were slow to spot its merits. Only now is the larger form fairly readily available. The shorter form is smaller in all its parts—height, flowers, and leaves—but no less showy. There is a photograph of the taller form in my *Perennials: How to Select, Grow & Enjoy* published in 1985, while the

photograph in my more recent *Time-Tested Plants: Thirty Years in a Four-Season Garden* is of the smaller form. Both have flourished in my garden all these years, in sun and in light shade. The larger form self-sows prodigiously, the small form sparingly. Plant Delights Nursery occasionally offers the shorter form as *S. m.* ‘Little Redhead’.

I’ve barely scratched the surface of desirable native plants I grow. *Penstemon digitalis* just came to mind. I could write at equal length about nonnatives. Most live in harmony in my garden; when they don’t, I deal with problems as they occur. When there are woods and fields in the vicinity where choice native plants can be seen (not, alas, the case in my neighborhood), we might well decide to eschew invasive plants, whether native or alien. Such restraint will not, unfortunately, prevent these woods and fields becoming housing developments or shopping malls, wherein lies a greater threat to native plants than anything gardeners do.

A final thought is that nature is often brutal, forever breaking records for rainfall, heat, or drought, and uncaring about the damage wrought. For nearly three decades, I would crawl around paying homage to the little spotted wintergreen, *Chimaphila maculata*, growing in small scattered patches in the dry, acid sand behind my house, where I do not garden. In 2003, hurricane Isabel flooded much of my garden with 3’ of brackish water. I keep hoping for the return of this tiny treasure, but it seems to be gone for good.



**Pamela Harper’s** life revolves around plants: reading, writing, lecturing, photographing, and working in her two sandy acres in Virginia. She is the author of five gardening books and is one of the country’s most widely published photographers. Pam’s garden will be on the May HPS bus tour of the Williamsburg/Virginia Beach area.

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