

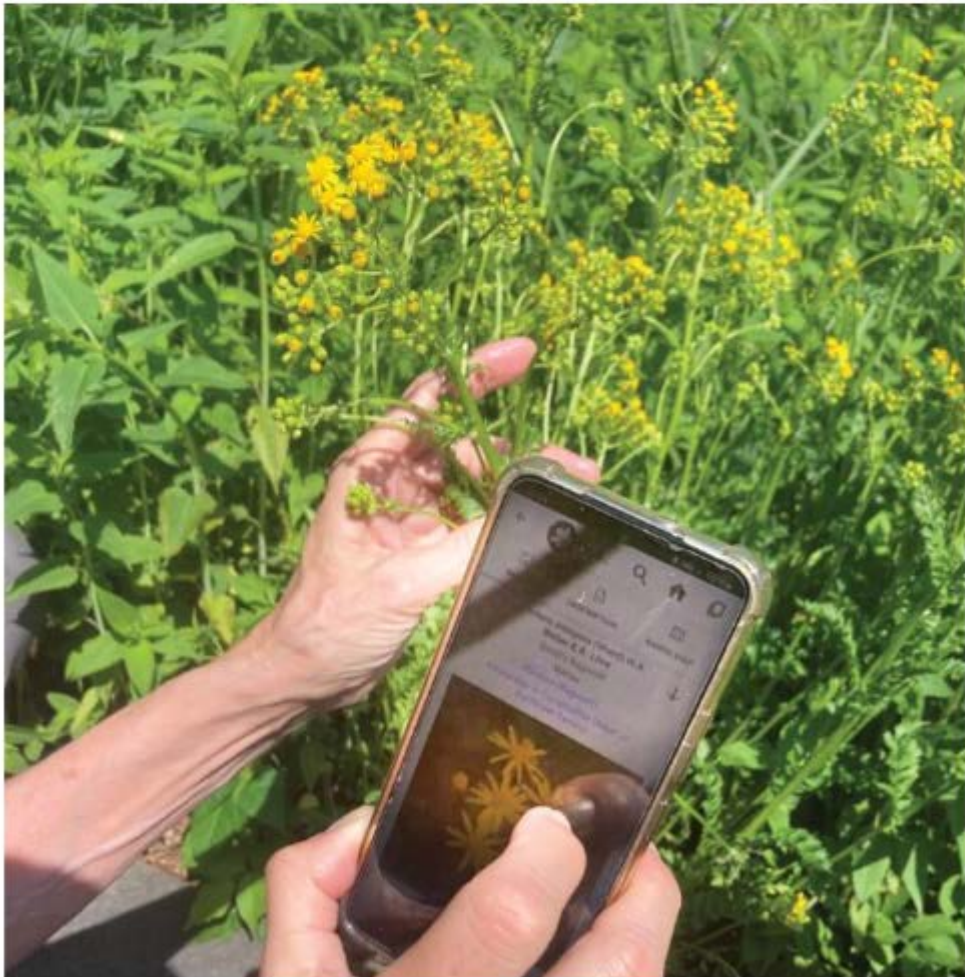
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Columns In the Garden Living

Flora of Virginia: A Resource for Informed Plant Choices

By Crozet Gazette - June 7, 2024

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By Bill Sublette

Piedmont Master Gardener

As one of my fellow Master Gardeners likes to say, "Plant choice matters." When we decide what to keep, what to discard and what to add in our yards and gardens, we face a dizzying array of choices. Fortunately, for those of us living in Virginia, there's a mobile app that can help us choose wisely.

The *Flora of Virginia* app puts at your fingertips the vast resources of the Flora of Virginia Project. In 2012, this nonprofit organization made botanical history when it published the 1,600-page *Flora of Virginia*, a comprehensive manual of 3,164 plant species native to or naturalized in the Commonwealth. Produced in collaboration with the Division of Natural Heritage in the state's Department of Conservation and Recreation, it is the long-awaited update of the last compendium of its kind, published in 1762.

The term "flora" refers to both the plant life of a region and a book that describes it. The previous *Flora* was largely the work of Colonial-era naturalist John Clayton, who served as the longtime clerk of Gloucester County and was described as the "the most eminent botanist and flowerist on the continent" at the time of his death in 1773. Published in Holland and written in Latin, the 1762 edition of his *Flora Virginica* contained only one image, a map of Virginia. The new *Flora*, written by J. Christopher Ludwig, John F. Townsend, Gary P. Fleming and Alan S. Weakley, is richly illustrated with 1,400 pen-and-ink drawings—most by noted Charlottesville botanical artist Lara Call Gastinger.

Weighing seven pounds, the print edition of the new *Flora* makes an unwieldy field guide. So, even before the book was published, the Flora of Virginia Project began working on a mobile app. First rolled out in 2017, it costs \$19.99 and offers such helpful features as a plant browser, where I recently searched for more information on the Pagoda Dogwood (*Cornus alternifolia*). I had seen the understory tree in flower while visiting a botanical garden in Williamsburg.

By Alan S. Weakley, J. Christopher Ludwig,
John F. Townsend, and Gary P. Fleming.
Bland Crowder, editor

Flora of VIRGINIA



With new taxa, new photos, more data,
more illustrations, new maps, and
an easy-to-use Graphic Key

Flora of Virginia Project and
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The app told me, for example, that the Pagoda Dogwood (aka Alternate-leaf Dogwood) is one of nine members of the genus *Cornus* in Virginia, including our more familiar Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*). The Pagoda's common name might suggest it was introduced from abroad, but the app revealed it is native to much of the state, particularly cooler upland areas such as Albemarle, Greene, and Nelson Counties.

For all such plants in its database, the app provides a set of images, a range map showing if and where it is native in the state, and a detailed description that includes hot links to definitions of relevant botanical terms. There's even a handy ruler on the side (in centimeters, about 2.5 to an inch) for measuring stems, leaves and flowers to help with plant identification.

Gardeners will find the *Flora* app a go-to resource for better understanding what they have in their yards and for making informed selections when adding new plants to their landscapes. In addition to looking up whether a plant is native in or near a particular county, we can see what conditions it needs to thrive (wet or dry, sun or shade) and how it will fit in visually and horticulturally with its neighbors. In short, the app helps us not only to choose the right plant for the right place but also to make plant choices that will protect and restore natural habitats.

"People need information and data to make decisions," said Jennifer Norwood, executive director of the Flora of Virginia Project, headquartered in Richmond. "More than 80 percent of the land in Virginia is privately held, so decisions about conservation, habitat restoration and climate change mitigation all need to happen at the private landowner level. The more we can get information into private landowners' hands, the better."

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For accurately identifying plants, whether in a public garden or the backwoods, having *Flora* on your phone can be a valuable complement to plant ID apps that use image recognition technology, such as PictureThis and iNaturalist. For one thing, users don't have to worry about whether a cellphone tower is within range. The *Flora* app, once downloaded, does not depend on a phone signal or a wireless network.



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While the *Flora* app may not offer image recognition capabilities, it does include a tried-and-true plant identification tool known as a “dichotomous key,” a series of “a” and “b” choices based on the plant’s physical characteristics. For example, are the leaves (a) needles or scalelike, or (b) broad and flat? Step by step, the key narrows down possibilities to the plant you wish to identify.

The app also offers a more user-friendly “graphic key” for plant identification. It divides plants into 11 major groups. For plants in each group, it presents a series of icons for selecting distinguishing characteristics such as moisture regime (wet place or dry place), light regime (sun, part shade or shade), leaf shape, flowering time and color. Again, with each set of choices, the key sifts out the possibilities.

Clicking through these and other features opens doors to a treasure trove of useful and fascinating information. For instance, the app’s Reference Library includes a process for using the graphic key to develop a “favorites” list of native plants suitable for your location and the site conditions of your yard or garden. You can use it to shop for plants at a native-plant nursery or other suppliers. Another click takes you to profiles of 50 botanical hotspots in Virginia—easily accessible places where you will find plant species typical of various regions around the state. Still another click in this section uncovers interesting facts about John Clayton (“our great botanist,” in the words of Thomas Jefferson) and the wider history of plant discovery in the Commonwealth.

To learn how to use the app’s tools, you can check out educational videos produced by the Flora team that take the viewer on a detailed tour of the plant ID keys. (Find them on floraofvirginia.org on the Education page.) More recently, the Flora project launched the Flora of Virginia Ambassador Program, which trains experienced app users to educate others on how to maximize its capabilities. As a first step, it partnered with the Virginia Master Naturalists and leading botanical gardens around the state to offer ambassador training to their constituencies.

Last fall, the Flora of Virginia Project added a new guide to the app called Natural Communities of Virginia. It describes 80 distinct plant communities in which certain species always grow together, with range maps of where these groups are likely to be found. Among other things, it underscores the importance of restoring and supporting natural plant communities in our home landscapes.

“Like all sciences, botany is a living, breathing thing. It changes constantly,” said Norwood. “So, you don’t publish something like this and walk away. That’s the beauty of the app. We are constantly evaluating updates and changes to make it easier to use, and adding new features.”

And she added: “Everybody plays a part in protecting and restoring the fabulous place we live in. So, understanding what you have in your yard matters. Understanding the difference between a native, a nonnative and an invasive, it matters. Even on a quarter-acre plot, what you do matters.”

For making good decisions for your plot of land, whatever the size, information is your friend. The Flora app gives you access to a huge and helpful bounty of it. To obtain the app (for iOS or Android) and the 1,600-page hardcopy Flora, and to learn how you can support the work of the nonprofit Foundation of the Flora of Virginia Project, visit floraofvirginia.org.

TAGS

Bill Sublette

In the Garden

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The Gazette features crisp news reporting and revealing interviews, all told with our distinctive local accents, plus calendar and classified services. The Gazette publishes on the first Thursday of the month and intends to publish biweekly when it has enough community and business support. If you want the neighborhood news around Western Albemarle, read the Crozet Gazette.

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