

## **Virginia Native Plant Society POSITION ON CONSERVATION**

The Virginia Native Plant Society is dedicated to the protection and preservation of the native plants of Virginia and their habitats, in order to sustain for generations to come the integrity of the Commonwealth's rich natural heritage of ecosystems and biodiversity for purposes of enjoyment, enlightenment, sustainable use, and our own very survival. To this end, we advocate and follow practices that will conserve our natural endowment, and we discourage and combat practices that will endanger or destroy it. We are committed to do all we can to slow the accelerating conversion of natural landscape to built and planted landscape and to reduce its damage to natural ecosystems.

### **Conservation Philosophy and Principles**

Conservation of the native flora is the unifying, highest goal of all activities and actions of the Virginia Native Plant Society. Plants provide the foundations of the world's ecosystems and ultimately sustain us and virtually all other life on earth. They give us oxygen to breathe, food, clothing, medicine, and shelter; they moderate temperatures, conserve water and soil. They also give us beauty, majesty, and mystery that nurture the human spirit. Virginia's natural landscape – from wild coastlines to forested mountains and fertile valleys, from shale barrens and rugged heights to great rivers and swamps – has through the millennia evolved and nurtured plant communities unrivaled in America in richness and diversity. We believe that preserving the Commonwealth's native plants is of the highest importance, and that ultimately this can be done only by saving their native habitats.

Because ours is a rapidly-changing landscape, this is an urgent task. Population expansion and changes in the way we live have produced never-ending development and road-building. The rampant destruction and fragmentation of habitat that results is the most serious threat to our native plants. Foremost among the others, many of them also directly related to human activities, is the spread of invasive alien plants. Already, scientists estimate that 10 percent of the native plants in the United States are at risk of extinction. To avert such significant loss, we believe it is essential to adopt, without delay, approaches to land use that serve the needs both of human communities and of the wild communities that are vital to their well-being.

We believe that conservation is everyone's responsibility. Our daily actions can have positive or negative consequences for nature and the environment, and we work for greater understanding by all Virginians of their native plant heritage and their responsibility to conserve it. Intelligent action by caring, informed citizens can stem much needless loss. Landowners, in particular, even in suburban subdivisions, play a role in conservation and recovery, and the larger the holdings the larger the role. Landscape professionals, a wide range of businesses, local, state, and federal governments all make important contributions. Voluntary organizations, which bring together people with varied perspectives, are especially important in calling attention to issues and in educating the public and key decision-makers.

While in a broad sense the Virginia Native Plant Society's concern for conservation extends to the animal world and the physical environment, our focus is the native flora in its entirety – the inconspicuous as well as the conspicuous, trees and shrubs, sedges and grasses as well as showy wildflowers. We do not divide the plant world into weeds and wildflowers; each species has its own special history and its own role in the ecosystem. While our attention is mainly on vascular plants (horsetails, clubmosses, ferns, conifers, flowering plants), we also encourage the study and conservation of other plants and plantlike

organisms (algae, mosses and liverworts, fungi, lichens) and the education of the public to their place in the ecosystem.

*Native* plants are species or other distinct genetic forms that have either evolved in the wild settings where they now occur naturally or arrived there from where they originated, whether near or far, by natural forces of dispersal operating over time *without* the help of humans. They are integral parts of these ecosystems, and part of our history and heritage as well. *Alien* or *exotic* plants, those that humans have introduced from other places, deliberately or inadvertently, may thrive, but they are not adapted to play the ecological roles of natives. For practical purposes, in North America a species is deemed native wherever it occurred when the first Europeans arrived and wherever it has migrated naturally since then, although it must be presumed that the very earliest peopling of the continent brought with it some Old World plants. On a finer scale, a hard-and-fast distinction is difficult to make. For example, when a species native to one part of the continent is introduced to a part it did not historically occupy, or when a species is reintroduced to a place where it once occurred but has since been extirpated, that species is native on one level, introduced on another.

Without question, alien species make an enormous, essential contribution to human welfare, in the fruits of our agriculture and the beauty of our gardens. Many become naturalized, persisting and spreading without assistance. In Virginia, as in North America generally, naturalized species have long been a significant part of the wild flora, a third or more in many places. Some are beloved as wildflowers or have a fascinating cultural history, and many have proven to be relatively benign in the ecosystem.

A few naturalized introductions have become aggressive pests, however, crowding out native species and causing costly damage or destruction to native ecosystems, agriculture and forestry, and the built environment. This is a serious, ever-growing problem, and we believe that, where feasible and advisable, appropriate measures should be taken to control or eradicate such *invasive* alien species, and to prevent the introduction of new invasives. Nevertheless, we encourage the citizens of Virginia to respect their flora as a whole, without *a priori* discrimination against all naturalized species.

The Virginia Native Plant Society welcomes gardeners and persons with allied interests and encourages them to garden so far as possible with plants native to Virginia, a diverse palette that offers many novel and beautiful elements for the garden or public landscape. These plants are adapted to the local conditions in Virginia's ecosystems and thus less likely to need high maintenance, and they pose less risk of invasive escape than alien species.

### **Conservation Policies**

The foremost task of the Virginia Native Plant Society is to do everything we can to save the present diversity of Virginia's plant communities and natural habitats and secure its continuation. To this end, it is the policy of the VNPS:

- To foster in Virginians of all ages love and respect for the natural world and appreciation of the diversity and interdependence of the Commonwealth's plants and wildlife, with primary focus on plant life in all its natural settings.
- To treat all wild places with respect and care, avoiding disruption of native plant communities through needless trampling or other damage or destruction of fragile habitats, niches, or species, and taking into account the concerns of landowners and of other visitors. A few careless actions can ruin much for many.

- To encourage and support scientific research on Virginia's flora as a whole, in order to increase knowledge and understanding of the plants, their communities, and their ecological requirements and interactions. (See note 2.)
- To promote a land ethic that encourages landowners to preserve as much habitat as possible on their land, especially natural areas and protective corridors and waysides that provide for the migration and dispersal of plants and animals.
- To offer activities and programs that educate the public about the importance of preserving Virginia's native habitats and flora and instill the values espoused by the VNPS. (See note 3.)
- To urge and support voluntary action, legislation, and regulation aimed at the preservation of rare, threatened, and endangered species or habitats, the curbing of invasive species, and the protection and natural recovery of landscape diversity, through the agency of governments, corporations, organizations, and private citizens.
- To make officials and the public aware of specific strongholds of rare and interesting native plants, as through the VNPS Registry of outstanding plant sites, and to foster and aid efforts to preserve such strongholds by the use of all appropriate means.
- To cooperate whenever possible with appropriate officials and agencies at all levels of government, and with local, regional, and national organizations that share our concerns to fashion a unified conservation effort.
- To encourage developers (see note 4) to find creative ways to save natural habitat and native species whenever possible.
- To use rescue or salvage operations only as a last resort, taking care that salvage does not become a convenient way out for developers, and that rescued species are not transplanted to other native habitats, thus falsifying the local history of natural dispersal, or to sites where their survival is doubtful. (See note 1.)
- To combat the spread of alien invasive plants through advocating stricter regulation by public agencies; informing and educating government officials, plant-related industries, and the general public about prevention and control of invasives; and sponsoring and participating in direct eradication and control campaigns.
- To foster habitat restoration, where feasible by natural recovery, allowing the land to revert and reseed itself from local seed sources resident in the soil or disseminated by local dispersal agents such as wind and birds. Where active planting is deemed necessary to success, local genotypes should be used. In either case the recovering landscape should be monitored and appropriately managed to ensure that native species, not invasive alien species, become established.
- To encourage gardeners, landscapers, and the nurseries that supply them to use native species and local genotypes insofar as possible, obtaining them only from stock that is certified to have been propagated and grown in a nursery, not dug in the wild, and when they do use alien species to exclude any that are known to be invasive.

- To discourage and minimize the use of herbicides and other pesticides on lawns, gardens, and other planted landscapes and in the environment generally, while recognizing that when used carefully and selectively, following the principles of integrated pest management (IPM), they can be a valuable management tool, and that alternatives may not always be feasible or adequate.
- To urge that wildflower-picking be limited to very common species, and that collecting native or non-invasive naturalized plants in the wild be limited to authorized rescues from land about to be developed, or bona fide educational or scientific uses for which alternatives such as taking photographs or collecting cuttings will not serve. Any collecting, whether of whole plants or parts such as seeds, should be conducted with adequate safeguards to assure the continued viability of the wild population, and should recognize that the cumulative actions of many people can be particularly harmful.

Adopted by the Board of Directors June 7, 2003

Notes on additions or changes subsequently adopted:

1. VNPS does not conduct or support rescues from any site where there is significant risk that well-established invasive alien plants or other pests will be spread by the relocation of native plants. (Added June 4, 2005)
2. Recognizing the importance of scientific knowledge to efforts to conserve the native flora, we endorse responsible collection of plant material from wild populations for scientific studies that depend on such collection and encourage the maintenance of such material in properly curated herbaria. VNPS endorses the Plant Conservation Roundtable's *Plant Conservation Guidelines: Scientists and Teachers*. (Added December 2, 2006)
3. We encourage schools and colleges to offer appropriate instruction about the importance of preserving native plants and their habitats. (Added March 10, 2007)
4. "Developers" was replaced by "those planning changes in land use, whether government agencies or private organizations." (Changed March 10, 2007)