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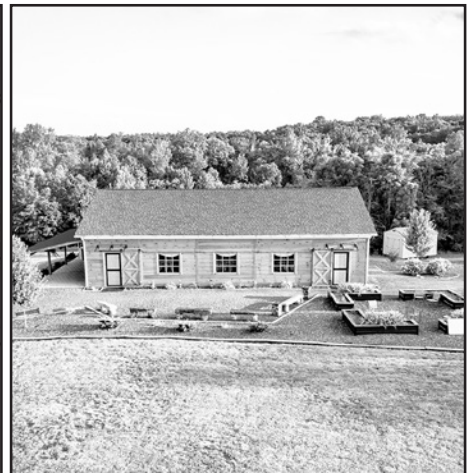
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Every gardener needs to think about soil

BY BRIAN CARLTON

So you've picked up plants from The Farmer's Daughters or B&M Greenhouse, you've got gardening tools and overall you're ready for the new gardening season. Eh, not quite. There's still one part missing, according to the Cooperative Extension. Is your soil ready?

Extension officials say bad soil or not correctly preparing soil is a critical self-inflicted problem for would-be gardeners.

Virginia Soil Health Coalition coordinator Mary Sketch says first and foremost, gardeners need to know what their soil is, so they can provide the right type of nutrients (and plant what's most likely to grow in them). The majority of this area has warmer soils to the east of a line that runs between Appomattox, Martinsville and Fredericksburg. What does that mean? Well, there's a couple points that are good to

know:

Our soil needs organic matter, and lots of it, to help the soil particles form good structure and increase drainage. Cooperative Extension officials say established beds will need yearly additions of soil amendments because our warm temperatures allow soil organisms to break down organic matter quickly.

Our soil erodes easily, so it should never stay exposed. It takes nature hundreds of years to make 1 inch of topsoil, but rain can erode 1 inch in a week. It's not fair, we know. It's also critical that we keep it from happening, as much as possible. Protect soil from erosion by always keeping it covered with plants and mulch. Covering soil also helps keep annual weeds at bay and can reduce the need for watering.

Our soil is strongly acidic. The natural soil pH for this area is 4.8 to 5.3 (neutral is 7.0), but most lawns, vegetables, and landscape plants prefer the 5.8 to 6.5



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The Farmer's Daughter has a large selection of garden decor and plants to choose from.

range, Extension officials say. Plants cannot use nutrients that are already present if the soil is too acidic, so applying lime regularly can be just as important as fertilizing. Lime is relatively inexpensive and probably the best garden value you will find. Always have a soil sample analyzed before applying lime, especially because in certain cases, typically around recent construction, soil pH can be much higher than expected.

WHAT TO USE

Now here's the bigger question. We mentioned organic material is needed to mix with parts of your soil. What do you use? There's two favorites recommended in this case.

MULCH

If you put down a 3 to 4 inch thick layer of mulch, it'll help in several ways, Extension officials say. Mulch keeps the soil surface from eroding, prevents soils-borne diseases from splashing onto leaves and flowers, keeps roots cool, conserves moisture in the soil, keeps the soil surface from baking into a crust, reduces weed germination, decays to provide a steady supply of organic materials and nutrients, and is an attractive finish for a planting area. Here's where some of those nurseries and garden centers

we mentioned earlier can help. Talk to them about how much mulch is needed for your garden, explain what you're looking to do and a bit about your garden's composition.

SOIL AMENDMENTS

Ok, maybe you don't want to use mulch. Another option are soil amendments. If you're wondering, that's another name for materials that are worked into the top several inches of soil, to improve drainage and loosen the soil where plants grow. Organic soil amendments can make a world of difference in heavy clay soils. Organic matter breaks down fast in our warm climate, so beds will need regular additions of soil amendments to maintain good soil structure and fertility.

Well-rotted compost is an excellent organic amendment for our clay soils. Just about any plant-derived material is fine as a starting material. Well-rotted compost is black and crumbly, and smells fresh and loamy. It is decomposed enough when you can no longer tell what most of it used to be. Finely-ground pine bark (sold as "pine bark soil conditioner") is also an excellent organic soil amendment. A pea-sized grind ($\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch) is ideal. Pine bark is a native and renewable resource.

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You can help your garden by ‘Throwing Shade’

Thanks to a new statewide initiative, Virginians can help improve the state’s ecosystems, meet a variety of landscaping goals, and save money.

The Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) has teamed up with retail nurseries across the state to launch the “Throwing Shade VA” program this spring. Now through May 1, or while supplies last, shoppers at participating nurseries can access customer discounts of \$25 on eligible native trees and shrubs valued at \$50 or more. Nurseries are reimbursed for discounts with allocated state water quality improvement funds. Here in the region, the main nursery working with the program is Burke Nursery, located at 9401 Burke Road in Burke.

“We wanted folks to get a discount for taking the initiative to plant native,” explained Molly O’Liddy, DOF urban and community forestry partnership coordinator, who is managing the program.

By lowering the cost for purchasing native species, DOF officials hope to spread awareness of their environmental benefits and expand biodiversity in the state.

“The overall goal is to get more trees and shrubs in the Virginia landscape, which, in turn, provides so many benefits for water and air quality, wildlife and pollinators,” remarked Delaney Long, DOF urban and community forestry project coordinator, who is helping manage the program.

Trees improve water quality by filtering out pollutants, storing harmful greenhouse gases and reducing erosion. Native trees and shrubs that evolved in Virginia’s ecosystems also are more adapted to their natural environment than ornamental species, and more likely to thrive. They also provide essential food and habitat for wildlife.

“Whether it’s meeting aesthetic goals, attracting more wildlife or providing shade, you’re bound to find something



JOHN KARATTI | HERALD

Local garden centers have many varieties of trees to choose from.

that will fill your need just by learning more about Virginia’s native species,” Long said.

IDENTIFY THE RIGHT SPECIES

She added that expert staff at participating nurseries can help identify the right species and growing conditions for meeting specific landscaping goals.

“It’s always good to ask a lot of questions to make sure you’re planting the right tree in the right place,” Long noted.

Customers can receive a \$25 discount on their purchase at a participating

nursery by selecting a native tree or shrub with a “Throwing Shade VA” tag, scanning the QR code on the tag to record where the tree will be planted, and showing the cashier that the information on the QR code was collected.

Information collected from the QR codes will help track water quality improvement goals and allocate funding for additional planting projects across Virginia.

Project officials hope to continue the program and open applications to interested nurseries this fall for next spring.

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How to take care of wood floors

Wood floors are coveted for a number of reasons, not the least of which is their aesthetic appeal. Many people prefer wood flooring because dust and dirt do not become trapped as they would in carpet fibers, seemingly making wood flooring easy to clean.

Most floors endure a lot of wear and tear. However, with care, wood flooring may last for decades. Part of that care includes understanding how to properly clean and maintain wood floors so they look their best. The following are some steps for keeping wood floors as pristine as possible.

REMOVE SHOES

It's a good idea to remove shoes, particularly heels, when walking on wood floors. Sharp heels, cleats and other shoes can scratch or dent wood flooring. All shoes can track in excess dirt, which can contribute to a lack of luster as well.

SWEEP OR VACUUM FREQUENTLY

The experts at The Spruce suggest sweeping, vacuuming or dust mopping wood floors daily. Dirt and dust make

floors more slippery, and dirt or sand particles can lead to scratches on the floor.

LEARN YOUR FLOORING TYPE

Wood flooring is broken down into three main categories: solid hardwood flooring, engineered hardwood flooring and laminate wood flooring. Traditional hardwood is made of planks or strips of any hardwood covered in a wood stain. Engineered flooring is manufactured by gluing together several thin plies of hardwood. Laminate flooring looks like wood but generally is a veneer or a photographic image of wood covered by a thick layer of melamine resin over fiberboard.

SKIP HARSH CLEANSERS

Regardless of flooring type, most are covered by a sealant that can become streaky or dull if the wrong cleanser is used. Avoid chlorine bleach, ammonia, pine oil, or undiluted vinegar. Instead, choose a cleanser that is specifically recommended for the flooring type. Do not allow water or solutions to sit on the floor, as that can contribute to staining and warping. With laminate flooring, avoid wet mopping unless the

flooring is specifically marked as being able to be wet. The underlayers of laminate flooring can warp if it gets wet.

DAMP IS BETTER THAN WET

When cleaning wood flooring, use a damp rather than a soaking wet mop. Better Homes & Gardens says standing water can damage wood surfaces.

USE THE HARD FLOOR SETTING

When vacuuming, adjust the vacuum

to a hard flooring setting, which will not engage the brush rollers on the vacuum head. Rollers can scratch wood and laminate flooring.

USE REPAIR PRODUCTS AS NEEDED

Scratch and repair kits can fill in small scratches. Wood floor polish and wood waxes also can revitalize worn floors. Again, check that the product is safe for your particular flooring before use.



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Warning signs of electrical problems

Homeowners know that owning a home provides a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. Home ownership also can increase the chances individuals view their homes as a sanctuary where they can relax and enjoy creature comforts they've personally chosen.

The comfort people feel inside their homes can be compromised when they begin to suspect certain safety issues, including electrical problems. The Electrical Safety Foundation estimates that home electrical fires account for roughly 51,000 fires and 500 deaths each year. Electrical problems will not always cause home fires, but it's still wise for homeowners to learn the potential warning signs that something is amiss with their home electrical systems.

FLICKERING LIGHTS

Flickering lights are more than a

mere nuisance. Bulbs sometimes flicker because they become loose, which can be remedied by turning the fixture off, waiting for the bulb to cool down to the touch and then tightening it. However, if the bulb was already tight when it was flickering, then the ESFI warns this could be a sign of an overloaded circuit. The tech experts at CNET advise homeowners to contact a certified electrician if they suspect their home electrical circuit is overloaded.

FREQUENTLY TRIPPED CIRCUITS

In a day and age when people rely so heavily on electronic devices like routers, desktop computers, tablets, smartphones, and more, a tripped circuit that cuts power to a home can be a major nuisance. But frequently tripped circuits indicate the presence of an electrical problem that's greater than a suddenly shut down computer or disconnected router. Tripping is actually a safety net that shuts down the

electrical current of a home in order to let homeowners know something is wrong with their electrical system. Frequently tripped circuits should be brought to the attention of a licensed electrician, who can identify what's causing the system to alert homeowners something is amiss.

WARM OR DISCOLORED WALL PLATES

It may not be common practice to touch wall plates, but the ESFI notes this can be a good way to determine if a home is having electrical issues. Discoloration on the wall plates should be enough to draw homeowners' attention. Some wall plates may even appear to be melting. Each of these issues could be a byproduct of various problems, including damaged wiring. A certified electrician can determine what's behind warm and/or discolored wall plates.

BURNING ODOR EMANATING FROM OUTLETS

The unpleasantness of this warning sign of electrical problems is enough

to compel an immediate investigation. Homeowners who detect a burning odor in their homes but aren't sure where it's coming from are urged to inspect their wall outlets. If the odor seems to be coming from an outlet, it could be due to various factors, including exposed wiring, poorly installed wiring, damaged wiring, or a foreign object in the outlet. Contact an electrician immediately if you detect a burning odor coming from an outlet.

Electrical issues in a home pose a serious safety risk. Homeowners should learn the warning signs of such issues and report their presence to a licensed electrician immediately.



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Outdoor plants toxic to household pets

Pets bring many positive changes to households. Pets can make homes more lively, and the companionship of animals can reduce feelings of loneliness while offering additional health benefits to pet owners.

Individuals who are preparing to adopt or purchase pets need to be mindful that they may need to make changes at home to ensure residences are safe places for pets to reside. Much in the way new parents must assess the environs for potential hazards to babies, pet owners should conduct similar inspections. These safety checks should occur both inside and in the yard if pets will be spending time outdoors. Poisonous plants are a potentially hidden hazard prospective pet owners must address before bringing a new pet home.

People generally do not give much thought to the plants they include in their homes and yards beyond the care instructions and how they can add to the aesthetic appeal. Homeowners may know if a plant likes the sun or shade, but they may not realize its potential for toxicity. That's because adults in particular are not prone to ingesting the plants in their yard that are inedible, unlike curious pets that may sniff and nibble plants when exploring their environments. For those with dogs and cats that will spend time outdoors, it's best to be aware of these potentially toxic plants, courtesy of the ASPCA, Dr. Buzby's and Garden

Design.

- **Autumn crocus:** There are various types of crocus plants, but the one most toxic to dogs is autumn crocus. The entire plant is toxic, but the highest concentration of toxic agent is found in the bulbs.

- **Sago palm:** People in warm climates may enjoy the look of palm trees on their properties. Despite its tropical and relaxing appearance, the Sago palm is extremely poisonous if ingested by pets, with the seeds being the most toxic part.

- **Lily:** Lilies are highly toxic to cats in particular. Even grooming pollen off of their fur or drinking water out of a vase where lilies are kept may cause kidney failure.

- **Tulips and hyacinth:** These early bloomers are beautiful flowers, but each contains a similar alkaloid toxin that is mild to moderately toxic to pets. Again, the highest concentration is found in the bulbs, which dogs or cats may dig up while exploring.

- **Aloe vera:** This soothing succulent may be part of an arid climate landscape. Aloe contains saponin, a toxin with foaming properties that can harm pets if ingested and cause severe dehydration.

- **Begonia:** A popular outdoor and houseplant, begonia has decorative flowers and attractive leaves. However, the plant can be toxic to cats and dogs if ingested, particularly the underground tubers.

- **Azalea:** This flowering shrub pro-

duces flowers in many colors, so it's often present in household landscapes. It's important to note that azaleas can be toxic to dogs and cats.

- **Yew:** American, Canadian and Japanese yew may be found around properties. These shrubs produce small red berries with green centers (almost looking like the reverse of a Spanish olive with pimento). Yew is toxic to cats and dogs.

- **Dahlia:** Dahlia produce flowers in

different colors, so they are common in flower beds. However, these plants also are mildly toxic to pets.

Many toxic plants can irritate the gastrointestinal system in pets, potentially resulting in vomiting, diarrhea or lethargy. Those who suspect a pet has ingested a poisonous plant should contact the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center at 888-426-4435 or their local veterinarian to learn about how to respond to possible exposure.





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Flora Fest returns to region

BY BRIAN CARLTON

As we go through April, it's time to start gathering plants and planning your garden, if you haven't already. One way to help with that is the annual Flora Fest, taking place this year at the Charlotte County Extension Office, located at 133 Legrande Avenue in Charlotte Court House.

As for the event, Extension officials say it will be a good time to spend outdoors with the family, going through the various plants up for sale. There will also be kids activities, raffle prizes and lunch available.

So when we talk about this Flora Fest, it's because this is a chance to find plants of all kinds. We're talking about full sun and shade loving plants, houseplants of all kinds, perennials, annuals, and shrubs. And the biggest part is that all of the plants are locally grown, so you'll be helping a grower from here in the region.

The event typically brings in a large crowd, and locals look forward to perusing the various offerings available year after year. Extension officials say this is a great way to usher in spring, spruce up your front yard, or get your backyard garden off to a great start at



affordable prices. Those who garden often know how expensive it can get; this event will help alleviate the burden off of overspending while getting quality, locally grown plants.

As far as the children's activities

go, a craft station will be set up where they will be able to choose between making a fairy garden or chia pet.

Last, but certainly not least, there will be a drawing with raffle tickets for various items, such as a gardening kit, bird house, and a homemade pottery planter.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR SPRING?

But beyond finding the right plants, you need to take a few steps to make sure your garden succeeds. The Extension staff can help with that, answering any questions you might have during the event.

But even before that, they say there's a couple things you can do to get ready.

First, go over your tools. By this, we're talking about sharpening blades, oil hinges and possibly replacing any worn-down material. You can use a mill file to sharpen blades, then add some oil to remove any corro-

sion. This may seem simple, but you'd be surprised how much easier it is to dig with a sharp blade.

Second, go check your supplies. Make sure you have enough fertilizer and soil on hand. Replenish your supply of plant supports, and pre-assemble any structures like tomato cages that you want to make for yourself. It is a lot easier to get this work done in your shed while the weather is still icky than to have to worry about it later in spring when there are plenty of things you would rather

be doing outside.

Third, the Extension officials suggest prepping garden beds before planting. Over winter, soil gets compacted, so the first thing you want to do, Extension officials say, is to loosen it back up by tilling or turning. Easiest way to do this? Use a tiller or a sharp spade, work the soil to about 12 to 14 inches deep to loosen it up.

You can use a soil test to see where you pH and nutrient levels are, which will tell you what type of materials you might want to add. If you have poor or clay-based soil, it's especially important to add a healthy layer of compost to improve the soil's texture, nutrient content, and moisture-retention. Then rake the soil level and water it lightly to help it settle and release air pockets.

And if your existing soil is poor in quality, the easiest suggestion, Extension officials say, is to go with a raised garden bed.

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How to recognize it's time to replace your windows

Windows are a major component of a home. Window installation professionals will tell homeowners that the average life span of residential windows is between 15 and 30 years. Most well-maintained products can last 20 years, so homeowners who have windows approaching that age may want to schedule a window assessment and possible replacement.

Replacing windows is a job that requires advanced skill, and this is not a do-it-yourself project. There are many qualified professional window installation companies that will work with homeowners to measure, order and install windows that will fit with the style of a home and local weather, all while providing features the homeowner desires.

For those wondering when to replace windows, here are some guidelines.

- Difficulty opening and closing win-

dows. A window that does not operate as it should can aggravate homeowners. If windows are sticking shut or cannot be securely closed, it's probably time for something new.

- There's apparent window damage. Accidents happen, and if a rock is kicked up from a lawnmower and cracks a window or if spring baseball practice has gone awry with an errant throw, windows may require replacement.

- Drafts in the window are common. If heating and cooling systems are working overtime, drafty, poorly insulated windows could be to blame. Various agencies can perform energy efficiency tests in a home. Windows that are determined to be the weak spots should be replaced.

- Dated windows are present in the home. Older windows may pose safety hazards, especially those in older homes. A larger window may be needed to comply with fire safety

codes allowing for window egress. Dated windows also may simply look "old" and compromise the aesthetics of a home.

- Outdoor noises are noticed quite readily. Newer windows can help reduce noise transmission. So those leaf blowers, airplanes, barking dogs, and kids playing basketball up the street won't disturb homeowners as they try to enjoy some peace and quiet indoors.

- Fading indoors is noted. Windows that do not feature low-emissivity (Low-E) glass coatings will not block UV rays. Those rays can cause fading to wood floors and furniture or pretty much anything the sunlight touches. Replacing existing windows with Low-E coating alternatives can safeguard belongings and improve window efficiency.

Window replacement may be necessary when existing windows are showing signs of aging or damage.



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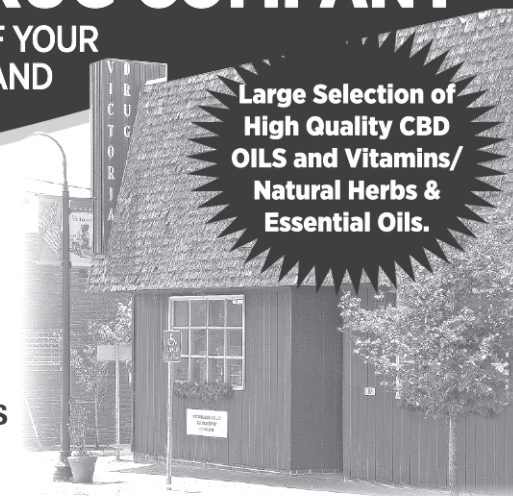
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How do you bring a dead garden back?

Gardening is a rewarding hobby that pays a host of significant dividends. Many people love gardening because it allows them to spend time outdoors, and that simple pleasure is indeed a notable benefit of working in a garden. Gardening also provides a host of additional benefits, including helping people get sufficient levels of exercise, reduce stress and improve mood.

With so much to gain from gardening, it's no wonder people look forward to getting their hands dirty in the garden each spring. As the weather warms up, consider these tips to help bring a garden back to life.

DISCARD THE DEAD WEIGHT

Winter can take its toll on a garden, even in regions where the weather between December and early spring is not especially harsh. Discard dead plants that have lingered into spring and prune any perennials that need it. Branches that fell during winter storms also should be removed at this point if they have not previously been discarded.

TEST THE SOIL

Soil testing kits can be purchased at local garden centers and home improvement retailers. Such tests are



inexpensive and can reveal if the soil needs to be amended to help plants thrive in the months to come.

MULCH GARDEN BEDS

Mulching benefits a garden by helping soil retain moisture and preventing the growth of weeds. Various garden experts note that mulching in spring can prevent weed seeds from germinating over the course of spring and summer. That means plants won't have to fight with weeds for water when the

temperature warms up. It also means gardeners won't have to spend time pulling weeds this summer.

INSPECT YOUR IRRIGATION SYSTEM

Homeowners with in-ground irrigation systems or above-ground systems that utilize a drip or soaker function can inspect the systems before plants begin to bloom. Damaged sprinkler heads or torn lines can deprive plants of water they will need to bloom and ultimately thrive once the weather warms up.

TUNE UP YOUR TOOLS

Gardening tools have likely been sitting around gathering dust since fall. Serious gardeners know that tools can be expensive, so it pays to protect that investment by maintaining the tools. Sharpened pruners help make plants less vulnerable to infestation and infection. Well-maintained tools like shovels and hoes also make more demanding gardening jobs a little bit easier, so don't forget to tune up your tools before the weather warms up.

Gardening helps in a number of ways

Millions of people embrace opportunities to get back in their gardens each spring, and they might be reaping more rewards from that activity than they realize. According to the American Institute of Stress, gardening sparks a level of creativity among enthusiasts, and that can help to alleviate stress by lowering levels of the hormone cortisol. In addition, authors of a 2022 study published in the journal *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening* concluded that gardening during the COVID-19 pandemic helped people cope with coronavirus-related stress through outdoor activity.



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Garden crops show the start of spring

Perhaps this season's early emergence of asparagus spears is a springtime reward for Virginians who endured a dreary, wet winter.

With a short harvest window usually beginning in April, this popular perennial vegetable is a top seller at the Farmville Farmers Market. Cooperative Extension officials said asparagus is always a high-demand item.

That demand may be even stronger, as fewer Virginia growers are harvesting asparagus, as revealed in the preliminary findings of the 2022 U.S. Census of Agriculture. Mostly harvested for fresh sales, Virginia-grown asparagus was cultivated at 157 farms on 123 acres in 2022. In 2013, multiple families grew Millennium asparagus, known

for its high yield, long life and soil adaptability; and the Purple Passion cultivar — sweet, nutty and tender, turning green when cooked.

Millenium spears were already pushing up in their garden beds by mid-March.

Virginia Cooperative Extension horticulture specialists report that the spears of this cold-hardy crop develop daily from underground crowns during the eight- to 10-week harvest window, and stems should reach 5 — 8 inches aboveground before harvesting.

Growing good asparagus is an exercise in patience. While this perennial vegetable can be productive for up to 50 years in some cases, asparagus should not be harvested the first season after crowns are set.

Harvest lightly for three to four

weeks the second year, Extension recommends. The fleshy root system needs to develop and store food reserves for growth in subsequent seasons. Plants harvested too heavily too soon often become weak and spindly, and crowns may never recover.

Many farmers, Extension officials say, planted 2-year-old crowns in 2022 and refrained from harvesting the following spring, letting them seed and turn brown.

Unharvested asparagus produces fern-like foliage with tiny yellow flowers and red berries that help support birds and honeybees. Their foot-deep asparagus crop is a companion planting to shallow-rooted strawberries.

To find fresh asparagus near you, visit the Virginia Grown website at vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown.



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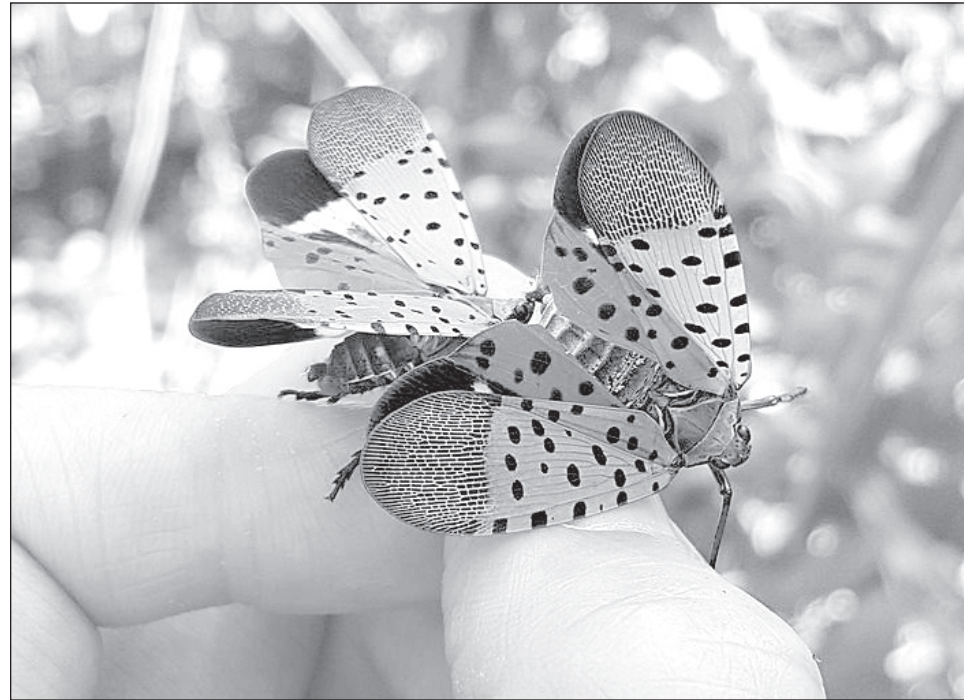
Cleverly camouflaged as clumps of mud, spotted lanternfly egg masses easily go undetected. State organizations are asking residents to pay attention, and report and destroy egg masses before they hatch in your garden this spring.

The Virginia Department of Forestry is hosting a Volunteer Spotted Lanternfly Egg Mass survey this March to monitor spread of the pest. Residents living outside of quarantine or known infestation areas who spot egg masses are encouraged to report them using the VDOF online survey form: arcg.is/19mG4K1.

“Spotted lanternfly egg masses are laid in the fall but don’t hatch until the following spring,” explained Lori Chamberlin, VDOF forest health program manager. She said now is an ideal time to look for them, while trees are bare and branches are easily visible.

The oval egg masses are about 1.5 inches long and a half-inch wide. Shiny gray with a waxy protective covering, the masses eventually turn a dull grayish brown, strongly resembling patches of mud or lichen.

Spotted lanternflies lay eggs on the underside of branches, on tree trunks and on objects like vehicles, homes, lawn furniture, grills, dog houses and decorative yard items. They’ve also



been found on fencing, tarps, decking, construction materials and firewood.

“Use binoculars — they can lay eggs in the very tops of trees,” Chamberlin said.

After reporting them, residents should destroy the egg masses by scraping them into a bag with rubbing alcohol or hand sanitizer.

“If that isn’t possible, smash them with a stick or hard object,” Chamberlin suggested.

The VDOF survey closes March 31,

but residents living outside of infestation areas are encouraged to continue photographing and reporting egg masses and SLF sightings to DOF local

area foresters or Virginia Cooperative Extension agents.

Subtle and tucked in hidden, protected areas, lanternfly eggs have proven pervasive and challenging to combat. To help the effort, a Virginia Tech program has been training dogs to sniff them out.

“Spotted lanternflies pose a significant threat to orchards and vineyards as well as homeowners’ lawns and gardens,” said Tony Banks, senior assistant director of agriculture, development and innovation for Virginia Farm Bureau Federation. “Everyone should be vigilant if they see new insects or egg masses on their property, vehicles or equipment.”

Spotted lanternflies feed on over 100 plant species but largely impact apples, hops, ornamental plants, stone fruits and wine grapes. The honeydew they secrete on plants causes sooty mold to grow — blocking photosynthesis in leaves, stressing the plant, and potentially leading to plant death.



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