

Elaine Mills, June 20, 2025

Coco coir, an alternative to non-renewable peat moss, was mentioned in the talk, leading to a question about whether **coconut trees are grown as a monoculture**.

- While coconuts have generally been cultivated as a monoculture, resulting in loss of unique ecosystems, a reduction in biodiversity, degraded soil, and depleted groundwater, agroforestry is now being introduced as a remedy, as described in this [article in Frontiers in Agronomy](#).

Mineral deposits caused by hard water, use of soluble fertilizers, and poor drainage can form around the inside rims of clay and plastic pots near the soil line. These can be removed with a scoring pad, steel wool, a wire-bristle brush, or a knife. See [an article](#) from Iowa State University Extension for details.

Regarding sources of **peat-free potting soil**, participants mentioned using products from Homestead Gardens and Back to the Roots. A web search should easily find a variety of brands.

With regard to **repotting plants and refreshing soil**:

- The article by the Northern Virginia Bird Alliance (see reference in the handout for this talk) suggests that plants in containers with commercial potting mix will need to be repotted with fresh soil every few years for continued growth. Loss of organic matter from natural decomposition will reduce both the drainage and the moisture-holding capacity of the soil.
- The oldest demonstration garden container plantings pictured in the talk were created in the spring of 2023, and they will be checked for repotting early in 2026. In the meantime, mulch is added in the spring and fall to renew the organic matter.

There were several questions about using sticks, leaves, cardboard, LECA (see below), or plant pot discs to **reduce the amount of soil needed in a large pot**.



- For garden pots with natives in our demonstration gardens, we mix the commercial potting mix with a good percentage of **leaf mulch** that is available in our county free of charge. This both reduces the cost of purchasing mix and adds beneficial organic matter.
- Master Gardener colleagues Benton Murphy and Evin Morrison make extensive use of containers for houseplants, orchids, cactus, and edibles. We agree that it's **generally best to match plants to the pot** rather than trying to modify pots with the addition of different materials, but they shared these thoughts:
 - **Branches and other dead plant material** are often used in the Hugelkultur gardening approach, which is an appropriate technique when creating larger raised garden beds. It is not as suitable for container gardening, because as those materials decompose, the soil level will sink, and nitrogen needed by the plants will be drawn away.
 - While **cardboard** will eventually break down, it will initially form an impermeable layer, inhibiting proper drainage and root growth of plants.
 - **LECA** (Light-weight Expanded Clay Aggregate) balls are a reusable component of a planting medium for growing orchids and other houseplants, but it could be expensive for big outdoor containers. Landscape lava rocks which are lightweight, porous, and more affordable might be a better option.
 - **Plastic planter discs**, which are inserted at the half-way point in the height of a pot, would reduce the amount of space for deep-rooted native plants, particularly perennials and grasses. If the roots grew through the disc's drainage holes, they could become tangled and drastic root pruning would need to be done to separate them from the disc at the time of repotting.
 - Some gardeners fill the bottom of a large pot by using **free "trash,"** such as crushed aluminum soda cans, packing peanuts (avoid biodegradable or Styrofoam), or plastic water bottles or flowerpots. Some of those materials might leach chemicals into the soil, or they may form air pockets that could either hold stagnant water or be open space for roots to dry out.

On the question of **controlling the spread of mint**, particularly in a **grow bag**:

- Growing Mint Family plants in a container is a good way to control their spread, and in both our Glencarlyn and Small Space demonstration gardens, we grow mints in the plastic pots that were shown in the presentation.



- I personally find that native mints, such as Clustered Mountain-mint (*Pycnanthemum muticum*), are fairly shallow-rooted and easy to dig up when it extends further than I would like.
- Fabric grow bags are generally used by vegetable gardeners for a single growing season, after which they are emptied, cleaned, and stored for the winter. With this usage, such bags typically last 3 to 5 growing seasons, depending on such factors as sun exposure, watering practices, and how frequently the bags are moved.
- In contrast, using those bags for perennials (such as mints) would cause them to wear out much more quickly when subjected to winter weather.

With regard to a question about **overwintering Pink Muhly Grass** in Zone 7a:

- *Muhlenbergia capillaris* can be grown successfully in Zones 5 to 11, and the plant's tan seed plumes will remain attractive through the winter, providing habitat for wildlife.
- While the plant can be vulnerable to frost damage in the northern parts of its range, that should not be a problem in Zone 7a.
- Because this grass tolerates drought and prefers to dry out in-between watering, especially if grown in a container, the greater concern would be to make certain that it isn't subjected to waterlogged soil in the winter. Excessive moisture can lead to root rot and plant death.

Regarding the **differences between two native species of *Heuchera***, I have personally used both interchangeably, but my research indicates these distinctions:

- Alumroot (*Heuchera americana*) is native to a good portion of the eastern and central U.S. In Virginia, it is common in the mountains and Piedmont and rare in the Coastal Plain. It has a clumping/mounding habit and heart-shaped leaves which can be green or variegated with colorful veins or marbling. Panicles of tiny creamy-pink flowers bloom on leafless stalks up to 24 inches tall.
- Hairy Alumroot (*Heuchera villosa*) has a slightly narrower range from New York to Georgia and west to Arkansas and Missouri. Its basal leaves are hairy and similar in shape to maple leaves. It has a more open form and is said to be more tolerant of heat and humidity. The 'Autumn Bride' cultivar is a favorite with its airy, long-lasting flower panicles that rise above the foliage to 36 inches.



One participant asked for information on sources of the straight species of Moss Phlox (*Phlox subulata*).

- Another participant indicated that she had found some at Colesville Nursery in Ashland, Virginia, although I only see cultivars listed in the company's online inventory.
- When I conferred with a native plant seller in Northern Virginia, he explained that he found that the species does not grow as reliably well as the cultivars, "mostly likely because cultivars were chosen not just because of color but also because of ease of growing." When he offered the straight species of that plant many years ago, he found there was not a demand for it as customers wanted cultivars identified by color. They ended up shopping at large nurseries for those plants and then were attracted to other non-native plants instead of becoming more educated about a wider selection of natives.

In response to questions on other specific plants:

- **Rattlesnake Master** (*Eryngium yuccifolium*) can be grown in containers. It serves as an excellent "thriller" due to its height and dramatic appearance. It was described in a combination pot in the talk, and I use it with Spotted Beebalm (*Monarda punctata*) as a "filler-spiller."
- **Golden Alexanders** (*Zizia aurea*) mentioned in the chat could be very nice either in a solo pot or used as a "filler" plant.
- Native **Wild Strawberry** (*Fragaria virginiana*), which I mentioned as a "spiller" in a demonstration garden pot, blooms from April to May, followed by sweet half-inch fruit.
- **Pussytoes** (*Antennaria plantaginifolia* or *A. neglecta*) were suggested as a another "spiller." These low-growing, mat-forming species will bloom early in the spring and their grayish, semi-evergreen foliage sets off other plants very nicely.
- **Blue Mistflower** (*Conoclinium coelestinum*) was listed in several combination pots for part-shade to shade. One participant noted that, in her experience, this plant blooms better in sun.



There was a request for suggestions of **long-blooming plants** from spring through fall.

- Most native plants will potentially bloom for several months, but not an entire growing season.
- One long-blooming plant mentioned in the chat is the native vine [Coral Honeysuckle](#) (*Lonicera sempervirens*). You can see its red and yellow trumpet-shaped flowers as early as April, and my own plant has flowered as late as early December if the weather is still relatively mild.
- Other plants often listed as long-blooming include Anise Hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*), various Coreopsis species (*Coreopsis*), Golden Alexanders (*Zizia aurea*), Obedient Plant (*Physostegia virginiana*), Oxeye (*Heliopsis helianthoides*), and Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*).
- See a helpful [bloom chart](#) for select native species grown in one of our demonstration pollinator gardens.
- Two recorded presentations I have given will provide overviews of native plants in bloom sequence for summer and fall: [Native Blooms for the Summer Garden](#) and [Native Flowers, Fruit & Foliage for Fall](#)

Native plants can be grown in **hanging baskets** to expand growing options and to protect plants from deer. One participant mentioned using a drip tray attached to the bottom of her hanging baskets to assist with water retention in the height of the summer.

- Some plants suggested by the Virginia Native Plant Society for hanging baskets include Moss Phlox (*Phlox subulata*), Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), Spotted Beebalm (*Monarda punctata*)
- Other possibilities for baskets in sun are Blue Mistflower (*Conoclinium coelestinum*), Mouse-eared Tickseed (*Coreopsis auriculata*)
- For part-shade to full shade, you might consider Green-and-Gold (*Chrysogonum virginianum*) or two evergreen ferns that do well in dry ground conditions: Christmas Fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*) and Marginal Wood Fern (*Dryopteris marginalis*)



In response to a question about presentations pertaining to Southwest Virginia, particularly the New River Valley:

- While some of the plants discussed in this presentation may not be native to this Southwest region, many of them are native throughout the state.
- The Plant Virginia Natives program has developed guides for the various regions of the state. There is a section of their website ([Plant SWVA Natives](#)) that specifically covers plants in the Roanoke and New River Valleys. On that site, you will see links to a [newsletter](#) and an excellent [guide to plants](#) for that region.

Attendees from other regions of Virginia may be interested in checking out the specific regional guides on the [Plant Virginia Natives website](#). There are now 10 of them.

- In the various video presentations on native plants for which links are provided in the handout, I endeavor to note the native range for each plant within the state of Virginia as well as within the wider Mid-Atlantic/East Coast regions.

As far as **sources of native plants**, here are a few helpful websites with lists of nurseries and plant sales:

- Plant NoVA Natives: [Native-only Sellers](#) and [Periodic Native Plant Sales](#)
- Plant Virginia Natives: [Where to Find VA Native Plants](#)
- Virginia Native Plant Society: [Native Plant Nurseries](#)
- Maryland Native Plant Society: [Native Plant Nurseries & Vendors](#)
- New Jersey Native Plant Society: [Where to Buy Natives](#)
- Pennsylvania Native Plant Society: [Native Plant Sources](#)

