



Charming Autumn Scenery by Xucheng Li, DNR Photo Contest 2014

As long as autumn lasts, I shall not have hands, canvas and colors enough to paint the beautiful things I see.

~ Vincent van Gogh

Autumn is here at last, apple-enjoyers! There's a chill in the air (occasionally) and as the leaves change (very, very gradually), our thoughts here at the Wildlife and Heritage Service turn to the hidden, the unusual, and the transformative.

This season, we highlight some spooky plants, conclude our series on the Full Moons with the Autumn Moons, give some love to the charismatic jumping spider, and check out what one Habichatter has been up to in the garden. Join us for a metaphorical jaunt through the chill autumn air and enjoy what we've dug up for you!

Team Habichat

P.S. We're also announcing the DNR Extinct and Extirpated Animals Kids Art Contest! Kids from ages 5-17 can participate, see attached flyer and optional template page.



In This Issue:

Thirteen Spooky Maryland Plants

It's October, and while retail displays would have us believe Halloween starts in August (Augtober), the real spooky season is now undeniably upon us. What better time to appreciate and celebrate some of the plants in our state that really understood the assignment with this month's theme!

Native Animal Profile: Jumping Spiders

Is it the spookiness of the season? The improbable skeletons we see in stores? Either way, we can't stop thinking about spiders! Join us on an exploration of a fascinating spider family!

Moon Mythology and Maryland Wildlife: Autumn Moons

Learn how the full moons receive their nicknames, and maybe consider creating our own. This modern folklore gives us an excellent opportunity to learn more about both the night sky and Maryland's wildlife!

Wild Acres in Action: Backyard Garden Success!

During the summer, a resident reached out to us about the success he's had in his garden. Ryan Elmore of Church Hill set out to turn his monoculture, grass-filled backyard into a healthy meadow. We are so impressed with his quick results!



Thirteen Spooky Maryland Plants

It's October, and while retail displays would have us believe Halloween starts in August (Augtober?), spooky season is now undeniably upon us. What better time to appreciate and celebrate some of the plants in our state that really understood the assignment with this month's theme! Whether it's in their creepy common names, their dark and sordid history, or their murderous intentions, these 13 have earned a spot on our list.

[Native plants](#)

Ghost Flower (aka Ghost Pipe, *Monotropa uniflora*)

A commonly spotted plant on woodland hikes all over Maryland, this hauntingly pale and [unique flower](#) is blessed with a lack of chlorophyll, explaining the absence of green. Also called corpse plant, it shrivels and blackens as it ages, but not until it has completed its parasitic cycle of draining the life out of surrounding fungal networks.

Witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)

The name itself likely originated in meanings far from the lady on a broom, with some [sources](#) listing the root word as related to the Anglo-Saxon word for “bendable” (wych). Witch-hazel is a beloved Maryland [shade-growing](#) native tree and frequent contributor to beautiful [fall foliage](#) in many parts of the state. DNR’s tree nursery often distributes this tree, with the help of [seed sourcing](#) by volunteers.



Devil's Walkingstick (*Aralia spinosa*)

One only needs to take a quick look at this tree to see how it earned its common name. Large, sharp thorns surround the trunk, sometimes at lengths over half an inch. Despite its dark name and prickly exterior, this tree is a force for good: native, deer-resistant, and easy to grow, providing flowers for native pollinators and [fruit for mammals](#) and birds. A [champion](#) in the National Big Tree Program (the largest known in the state) of this species inhabits Baltimore County.

Doll's-Eyes (*Actaea pachypoda*)

Present on almost every list of creepy plants, this weirdo (we mean that as a compliment!) produces a shiny white fruit with a black center. Birds happily eat the fruit, spreading this plant through seeds in their droppings, while [rabbits avoid them](#). The other common name, baneberry, gives a clear warning about the toxicity of this fruit to humans. This plant is not the only toxic species to have “bane” in the common name, as exemplified by dogbane (family Apocynaceae) and wolfsbane (Aconitum genus).



Pine Barrens Death-camas (*Stenanthium leimanthoides*)

A [rare](#) and beautiful, bone-colored plant that promises death in its common name - what could be more sinister? This habitat specialist is confined in Maryland to a highly threatened zone of spring-fed seepage slopes. It is [globally imperiled](#) due to habitat loss, existing only in a few of our neighboring states. All parts of the plant are highly poisonous, but the threat of its extinction is perhaps the scariest thing of all!

Sheepkill (*Kalmia angustifolia*)

Speaking of death, keep an eye on your sheep around the pink-flowering, evergreen shrub sometimes called sheepkill, lambkill, or more commonly (and less threateningly) sheep laurel. As its name suggests, this plant is highly toxic to livestock but provides habitat and forage value for [wildlife](#) including grouse and other birds. It is also the [larval host plant](#) to various species of native moths and butterflies.

Snaky Flora

While we don't believe snakes are creepy here at the Wildlife and Heritage Service, we must reluctantly acknowledge that fear of snakes - ophidiophobia or herpetophobia - is one of the top human fears, with some estimates showing that [one third of humans](#) experience it. Our favorite (of many) Maryland native plants that honor the state's great serpents include:

- Rattlesnake weed (*Heiracium venosum*) - a dandelion-like yellow-flowering plant actually found in [shale barrens](#) and woodland areas where rattlesnakes live! Maryland is home to only one rattlesnake, the [timber rattlesnake](#) found in Western Maryland.
- Rattlesnake plantains (*Goodyera* genus) - a dainty group of Maryland [orchids](#), two of which are on the state's [Rare, Threatened and Endangered plants list](#).
- Snakemouth (alternate common name for rose pogonia, *Pogonia ophioglossoides*) - another rare orchid with a fringed labellum that looks the part.

Carnivorous Plants

Maryland is home to numerous plants with murderous intentions that are worthy of our respect. Our beloved pitcher plant (*Sarracenia purpurea*), the quintessential Maryland example, lures its prey down an inviting tunnel with tantalizing smells and cheerful colors, then dissolves the hapless bug in an enzymatic death liquid. The aquatic swollen bladderwort (*Utricularia inflata*) is perhaps even more murderously nefarious, sneakily sucking up mosquito larvae and other prey using a rather ingenious hair-trigger activated vacuum trap mechanism. Then there are [sundews](#), whose cheerfully misleading names say nothing of their sticky - and deadly - bug-trapping leaves.

Nightshades

The Solanaceae family has a longstanding reputation for biological weaponization and plant toxicity, while confusingly also providing us the tasty potato and tomato. This group could provide enough lore for an entire article of its own, but for now let's remember there are more than [45 members](#) of the nightshade family growing wild (though not all native) in Maryland. Like fungi, these plants remind us NEVER to consume anything wild unless its identity and edibility has been confirmed by a reliable expert. Also, beware of edible plant [AI tools and resources](#) rife with errors - when it comes to eating wild flora, one mistake could be your last.

[Invasive plants](#)

Poison Hemlock (*Conium maculatum*)

Sometimes a highly toxic plant looks just like an innocent carrot. Is this intentional? Ask the plant. Whatever you do, just don't eat it or feed it to your [animals](#). This plant was introduced from Europe to the United States for its attractive flowers, with deadly consequences.

Asiatic Bittersweet (*Celastrus orbiculatus*)

Like many aggressive vines, this [non-native plant](#) quite literally strangles and suffocates its victims. This mechanism guarantees more sunlight and resources for the plant, enabling its successful survival.

Wavyleaf Basketgrass (*Oplismenus undulatifolius*)

Anyone who has tried to rid an area of this plant will attest to its slightly evil (if respectable) [ability to spread](#) and create “dead zone” monocultures. Like creatures amassing in a horror film, it feels impossible at times to combat the tenacity of this low-growing species that quickly and efficiently carpets shady forest floors, out-competing numerous native species and providing very little wildlife value.

Japanese Barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*)

This plant goes one step further by not only crowding out native forests, but also [altering the soil](#) to prevent anything else from being able to grow. Devious! To make matters worse, it creates the perfect microclimate for disease-carrying ticks to thrive, again while providing no value to native wildlife. Even the hardest of [weed warriors](#) come away from this plant battered and bruised with bloody scratches, owing to the plant’s tenacious roots and abundant, dagger-like thorns.

Native Animal Profile: Jumping Spiders (Family Salticidae)



Peppered Jumping Spider on Tickseed Sunflower by Lisa Mayo, Maryland DNR Photo Contest 2023

A teeny tiny creature with a fuzzy face and giant eyes – obviously we’re discussing .. jumping spiders! (If you were thinking kitten, close enough!)

Although their presence can sometimes be startling, jumping spiders are perhaps one of the best known of the families of [spiders around us](#). This is for good reason! Salticidae, the family to which jumping spiders belong, is the largest spider family, with nearly [7,000 species](#) described in scientific literature, making up 13% of all spider species. In Maryland, we host [about 65 of those species](#), six of which are not native. Those species show incredible variation in shape, ranging from what we might consider a more “traditional” spider to [ant-mimics](#) and even [beetle mimics](#)! Their form belies their function; these spiders are stealthy hunters, and looking like insects allows them to get close to their prey.



Ant-mimic Jumping Spider - Synemosyna formica, Carderock Park, Carderock, Maryland
By Judy Gallagher, [CC BY 2.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons

Spider Sense?

Jumping spiders have some incredible senses!

The members of the Salticidae family have eight eyes, arranged in four sets, placed in such a way that some species are able to see nearly all the way around them. In most species, one of the sets is not usable, a remnant of ancestral use, but in some species these eyes [are still used as motion detectors](#). Jumping spiders also have incredibly good color vision, with eyes [sensitive to UV light](#). This leads to the ability to see patterns visible to humans only under UV lights, and it's been observed that some jumping spider species have four photoreceptors, compared to three for humans.

Bold jumping spiders (*Phidippus audax*) are able to combine their incredible eyesight with the surprisingly acute problem solving of the jumping spider family, and have the [ability to learn by watching](#), a rare feature for such a tiny animal.

Jump Around!

"Salticidae" comes from the Latin root "saltus" meaning "leap" and to no one's surprise, jumping spiders are known for their [incredible vaulting](#).

Jumping spiders don't build webs to catch dinner, instead relying on stalking and leaping to catch food, at which point they bite to immobilize their prey. This means how they move is integral to their survival. How far they can jump varies widely by species, but the [Colonus puerperus](#), found in Maryland, has been known to jump as much as [38 times their own body length](#).

Another important element to jumping spider's hunting is their use of silk as a tether. By attaching themselves to a stable point before moving, including while jumping, they

provide themselves a safety line to return to where they started. Likewise, it's been shown that their silk "dragline" actually helps with [stabilizing their jumps](#), and slowing their descent when necessary. (Read more about the [engineering applications of spider silk](#).)

Where does a spider without a web live? Jumping spiders have solved this problem by [making "tents" to sleep in](#) during the night, through bad weather, and even through the winter.



Jumping spider in a constructed shelter. Photo by Joshua Fisher, submitted to the 2023 DNR Photo Contest, second place winner in spring category.

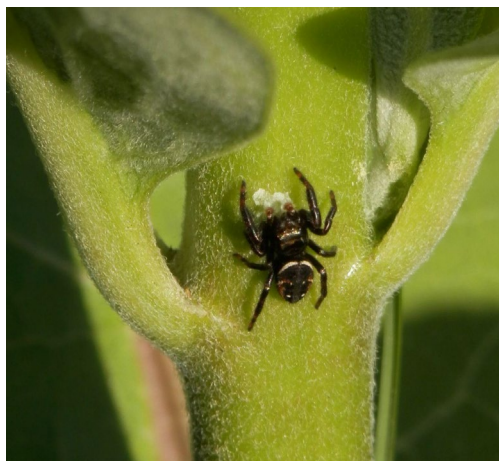
The Sweet Spot

While spiders are generally carnivores, eating mostly insects and other small invertebrates, some jumping spiders have been observed to eat pollen and even drink nectar. [One study from 2001](#) found that spiders in a lab setting chose sugar solutions over distilled water, pointing to the conclusion that this behavior was not just in search of hydration. In total, 90 species were tested in the study, and all of them drank from presented flowers, and from the sucrose solution as well as the distilled water, spending more time with the sucrose solution than the water without nutritional value.



Jumping Spider on Fleabane by Larry Helms, submitted to the 2016 DNR Photo Contest, second place winner in the summer category.

Several of the species in the 2001 study were native to Maryland, including the fuzzy canopy jumper ([*Phidippus otiosus*](#)), the Common Hentz jumper ([*Hentzia palmarum*](#)), the ant-mimicking [*Peckhamia americana*](#), the alien-looking magnolia green jumper ([*Lyssomanes viridis*](#)), and the crab-like hammerjawed jumper ([*Zygoballus rufipes*](#)).



*This jumping spider, native to Maryland (and the rest of North America), seems to be feeding on the stem of the plant it rests on. Brilliant Jumping Spider (*Phidippus clarus*) - Guelph, Ontario by Ryan Hodnett, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons*

This isn't the only unusual feeding habit of jumping spiders; a [2016 summary](#) of research showed that some ant-mimicking jumping spiders (*Peckhamia* genus included, of which [*Peckhamia americana*](#) is a Maryland resident) are able to approach nectar sources fiercely guarded by ants and amicably share the resource. This points to how effective their mimicry is, and gives us all a standard to reach for when trying to sneak

into parties to steal cookies.

While jumping spiders clearly have a love of plants, the feeling may be mutual. [A study of jumping spiders in New Jersey](#) showed that [sensitive partridge pea](#) (*Chamaecrista nictitans*) plants on which jumping spiders resided and ate from, produced significantly more seed than those without a resident spider. The benefit seems to be directly related to the spider feeding on the plant as well, as the plants with a spider did not experience less plant predation from other bugs.

This all has not even scratched the surface of the myriad ways jumping spiders dance their way through what we think of as “spider behavior.” The next time you see a fuzzy face with big eyes looking back at you, stop and consider the tiny Salticidaes- and maybe offer them a flower.

For more about spiders, please read on:

[A Brief Guide to Maryland Spiders](#)

[Common Spiders of Maryland](#)

[Fear-busting Creepy Critters: Spiders](#)

[University of Maryland: Spiders in Maryland](#)

[Dancing, Deception and Cannibalism: The myths and realities of Maryland spiders](#)

[Spider Activity Pack](#)

[Orb Weavers](#)

Moon Mythology and Maryland Wildlife: Autumn Moons

By Katy Gorsuch



Setting Full Moon by Susan Hale, submitted to the 2016 Maryland DNR Photo Contest

Earth continues its yearly orbit, and we in the Northern Hemisphere begin our progression to the darkest portions of the year. It's time to conclude our exploration of the full moons and the diverse and wonderful ecology of Maryland they represent.

As a reminder, while some of the full moons have names that go back to Indigenous traditions, other folk names for the full moons have developed in the last hundred years. Recorded in English as far back as [1722](#), Indigenous peoples of the Americas have named the full moons, often in alignment with animals responding to the changing seasons, or locally important events.

Full moon names varied widely depending on geographic location and language family amongst Native Americans, as wildlife responds differently depending on the length of the day, i.e., there is less sunlight in Massachusetts in October than in Maryland on the same day. For example, in some locations one full moon might be named "Goose Moon," while in another location the same time period could be the "Cold Moon." The practice of naming moons hasn't been historically universal, and in the centuries since it

was first recorded by colonists, misinformation has proliferated. For our purposes, using supposed Algonquian full moon names as a starting point provides a wonderful opportunity for us to explore Maryland's unique wildlife and how the seasons change!

Autumn Moons:

October

Hunter's Moon, Travelling Moon

This moon is often called the **Hunter's Moon**, but is cited in explorer [John Carver's 1779 work](#) as the "**Travelling Moon**," due to it being a time wherein nomadic peoples may move to winter home sites. In fact, the term "Hunter's Moon" may be from European tradition, having shown up unattached to Native American tradition in [text as far back as 1673](#).



Birds Into the Sun by Brian Reidy, DNR Photo Contest 2024

Migration has long been a part of the yearly travels of both peoples around the world as well as animal populations. In Maryland, many native animals take advantage of the shoulder seasons of spring and autumn to move to sites where resources may be more available. The familiar term "snow bird," used to apply to humans who travel south when it turns cold, comes from the habit of many birds to migrate to warmer southerly regions in the fall. This said, [many bird species' seasonal instincts](#) come not from physical experience of colder temperatures, but from the change in light as the year progresses, called a photoperiod. This is [not the only factor](#) influencing this behavior, but it's been

shown to be very persuasive, and can even help signal to birds [when to stop migrating](#), along with geomagnetic cues.

Many animals will begin eating more in late summer, a behavior called hyperphagia, as the total hours of daylight begin to wane. This ensures that in the event of an unusually long growing season, these species are not caught by a sudden start of cold temperatures. Other animals, like the American black bear, are [influenced both by temperature and photoperiod](#).



Monarch on Goldenrod by Victoria Schwinabart, DNR Photo Contest 2021

Suggested Travelling Moon Activities: Select some of the birds you see regularly and **research their migratory patterns**. Do they stay through the winter?

Plan your garden to grow more native plants, including plants that support adult [monarch butterflies](#), as well as milkweed for monarch caterpillars. Monarchs migrate south during this portion of the year, and rely on late-blooming flowers and plants to make it to their next destination. You can check out [recommendations for the Mid-Atlantic region here](#), and if you've been planting milkweed without getting caterpillars, consider planting flowers for the adults nearby to encourage them to visit.

Suggested Hunter's Moon Activities: Take a [hunter education class](#), or refresh your knowledge if you haven't taken one in a while! Hunting deer is an important element in deer management, as Maryland has not been home to apex predators like

wolves in more than 200 years. If you're interested in hunting, but not sure where to start, [join a mentored hunt](#) for practical help!

November

Beaver Moon

November is cited as the **Beaver Moon**, as this is when “the beavers begin to take shelter in their houses, having laid up a sufficient store of provisions for the winter season.” Happily, this gives us an opportunity to discuss the winter habits of this [intriguing aquatic mammal](#).



Beaver by William Pully, DNR Photo Contest 2023

Beavers ([Castor canadensis](#)) are the largest rodent in Maryland and the entire United States. While we may think of them as roughly the size of a small dog (about 44 pounds is average), they can reach [weights of 77 pounds](#)! The largest beaver on record weighed [110 pounds](#), caught in 1921 in Wisconsin. Based on fossil records, ancient giant beavers like *Castoroides ohioensis* may have been [as large as 200-275 pounds](#).

During winter, adult beavers decrease in size ([including their tails](#)), using the fat stores on their bodies to get through times with thin resources. Unlike some other mammals, beavers do not hibernate during the winter, although they do [decrease their activity](#).

Dam repair waits for warmer weather, although lodge maintenance is accomplished, along with [grooming, feeding, and most importantly, sleeping and relaxing](#). Depending on outside conditions, beavers may leave their dens [only a few times a night](#) to bring food inside from their cache. Contrary to popular opinion, beavers don't eat fish, and their winter food caches are made up of woody plants.

Beavers spend a [significant portion of the fall](#) working on their dams and collecting the branches that will form their food for the winter. The goal of their dam construction during this season is to ensure the water around their lodge is deep enough to provide for an underwater entrance that will not freeze during the coldest parts of the winter (in case another entrance freezes over). In warmer areas, beavers won't stock their pantry in the same way, devoting their fall to lodge and dam work exclusively.



A happy family of beavers by Mohammed Mubashir, submitted to the 2018 Maryland DNR Photo Contest. Beavers typically live in family groups during the winter.

Suggested Beaver Moon Activities: Intriguingly, giant beavers feature in several legends of Algonquian-speaking peoples, and there is no better time to **get cozy and read** than the rapidly cooling late fall! The [Library of Congress has assembled a “minibibliography”](#) of books of lore and oral storytelling, helpfully also including books appropriate for kids, broken down by age group.



December 2025 Cold Supermoon, Talbot County, by Anthony Burrows

December

Cold Moon, Hunting Moon

December has been referred to as either the **Cold Moon** or **Hunting Moon**, depending on the source. Regardless of what's going on in the human world, December ushers in the official beginning of winter with the Winter Solstice (December 21 or 22).

Winter Solstice is the “shortest day of the year,” in that it is the smallest amount of daylight that we’ll receive in the Northern Hemisphere. Interestingly, the cold weather we experience is entirely related to the tilt of the planet – January 3 is actually the day the Earth is closest to the Sun in its yearly orbit (perihelion), while [late June or early July](#) is when the Earth is farthest (aphelion).

The change in light, as we’ve mentioned above, is often the most important cue that encourages animals to prepare for winter, both behaviorally and physically. Shortening photoperiods prompt the growth of longer and or denser hair for many mammals, including the famous Assateague horses. In fact, it’s been shown that exposure to artificial light can [encourage changes in horse and pony coats](#), often also in relation to the summer and winter solstices.



Assateague Winter 2025 - January 6th Snow Storm - DNR Staff

Suggested Cold Moon Activities: A lot of Marylanders contact us in DNR about worries for the native animals of the state during the coldest months of the year. The best thing you can do to help our native species is to ensure they have the resources they need to make it through the winter.

Bees: Most [North American bees](#) are solitary, and overwinter individually. Their preferred locations may be either in the ground, under autumn leaves, or in hollow reeds and stems from the year's plants. Wildflowers are particularly good for this! In order to help them weather the winter, **leave garden cleanup for late spring**, allowing them to use those dead stems.

Butterflies, moths, fireflies, frogs and toads: All these Marylanders, like some bees, overwinter under layers of fallen foliage. Another important reason to [leave the leaves](#) in your yard! If you are compelled to remove them, for HOA or aesthetic reasons, use a rake to move those leaves to mulch beds, so they can continue to provide nutrients and habitat to our native insects and other small animals!

Bats: Maryland's bats are all insectivores, and November through the end of cold weather is a time of dormancy because of the lack of food. During winter, bats may choose human houses, especially attics, to use as shelter. If you find bats in your attic this winter, [use our guide](#) to safely navigate the situation- it's typically recommended to avoid kicking them out until spring, when the bats can find new roosts without facing harsh conditions.

Birds: Birds unsuited to cold weather migrate South in the winter, so there is generally no need to be concerned about those birds who do stay in Maryland. If you are concerned for the [birds in your yard](#), you can ensure there is cover where they can roost in poor weather.

Mammals: Most of Maryland's mammals who don't hibernate put on significant weight, as well as a new winter coat, when cold weather approaches! Likewise, those who are awake in the winter are often generalist species, able to eat a vast range of foods that may be available to them. The best way you can help them is to **provide habitat** for them, so they can help themselves to shelter and to native plants as food sources.

If you'd like to turn your space into much-needed habitat, check out our [Wild Acres resources](#)!



Snow on the Roof Bird House by Gwen Neff, DNR Photo Contest 2020

Wild Acres In Action: Backyard Garden Success!



This summer, a resident reached out to us about the success he's had in his garden. Ryan Elmore of Church Hill in Queen Anne's County set out to turn his monoculture, grass-filled backyard into a healthy meadow. We are so impressed with his quick results! Ryan mixed practical food crop plants like lima beans and watermelon with native pollinator-friendly species like black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*), fall phlox (*Phlox paniculata*), coneflowers (family Asteraceae), and evening primrose.

Ryan reports he's seen "a huge population of butterflies, moths, grasshoppers, mantids, birds and rabbits! It really was mind blowing the amount of birds, native bees, and all manner of butterflies and moths I see everyday out back now!" Congratulations to Ryan



for taking the first steps in creating great wildlife habitat, and thanks so much for sharing!

Love what you see here and want to get started with your own project? Check out our article on [how to get started with native plants](#)! Remember to stay skeptical of “meadow mix” seed packets - they often include species that are not native to our immediate region. Opt instead for individual, verified, Maryland native species whenever possible. For more inspiration, peruse our other Wild Acres in Action articles in the [HabiChat archives](#).

Don't forget to certify your garden; signs that explain why you've planted native species can go a long way, helping educate the public about the importance of biodiversity. Check out our list of free resources at the bottom of the [Wild Acres page](#).

Do you want your garden to be featured in an upcoming issue of HabiChat? We love to hear from you! Email sarah.witcher1@maryland.gov.



All photos by Ryan Elmore