

Fall Quarterly 2026

Arlington Regional Master Naturalists

Notes on Nature



Join the Christmas Bird Count!

The National Audubon Society's [Christmas Bird Count](#) is one of the longest running wildlife censuses in the world. The CBC began on Christmas day in 1900 as a way to conserve America's natural heritage by counting birds rather than hunting them. This year is the 127th anniversary of that first CBC, when birders across the entire Western Hemisphere will get up early to count birds from December 14 to January 5, 2027.

Each individual count takes place in a 15-mile-wide circle. A compiler is responsible for organizing volunteers and submitting observations to the National Audubon Society. Within each circle, participants tally all birds seen or heard that day — not only by species but also by total numbers, for a clear idea of the health of bird populations in each circle. Birds are counted throughout each 24-hour period, but actual outings typically last from 8 a.m. to noon.

Participation is free, and birders at all levels are welcome. Each 15-mile circle is divided into sectors. The circle compiler is supported by sector leads who are assigned to part of each circle. In our area, the circle areas are Washington, D.C., with overlap into Virginia (the McLean area); Manassas-Bull Run; and Seneca MD/VA (including Great Falls National Park).

Consider choosing a circle near you and be part of the count! For more information, contact:

Manassas-Bull Run: Doug Levey, neomorphis0920@gmail.com. Please contact Doug by December 13! The count will be on Sunday, December 20 (*not December 13, like last year*).

DC Count Circle: Larry Cartwright, prowarbler@verizon.net. The count will be on Saturday, December 19.

Seneca MD/VA: Jim Nelson, kingfishers2@verizon.net. The count will be on Sunday, December 20.

Based on an article by Colt Gregory for the 2024 CBC. The photo of a red-bellied woodpecker is by Iwolfartist, Wikimedia Commons.



It's Finally Fall: A Great Time of Year to Plant New Natives!

Did you think you'd have to wait until next spring to install beautiful native plants in your garden? Not true! A number of places offer the perfect plants to benefit local wildlife and spruce up your yard this fall.

Autumn is the best time to install new perennials, trees, and shrubs, like the fall-blooming New England aster shown in the photo. Warmer soils and cooler temperatures are ideal for reducing transplant shock and providing enough time for plants to become established before winter. (And woody plants may even be installed during winter, when they're dormant, so they can start strong in the spring.)

Whether they are perennials or woodies, by spring the new natives will be able to provide benefits to the local critters that depend on them AND add wonderful beauty to your garden. Wondering where to buy native plants in our area? You can find a list of natives-only plant sellers [here](#).

Read the full story by Kasha Helget [here](#). Photo by Kasha Helget.



Finding Kitten-Cute Tree Frogs for Fun and Science

A hidden treasure that sparked a global study could be hiding in plain sight: mutant blue-colored frogs. They were back last summer at [Huntley Meadows Park](#) in Alexandria (where the photo of a blue frog was taken) and at [Leesylvania State Park](#) in Woodbridge. More might just be waiting for you to discover in your neighborhood or during your travels, helping scientists learn more about an unusual frog condition called axanthism.



Axanthism, according to the [Blue Frog Project](#) published last year, is caused by “changes in diet or genetic mutations [that] can reduce the amount of yellow pigment in skin such that a normally green frog appears blue (axanthic).” Records of blue frog sightings remained rare until [iNaturalist](#) citizen-science app users like me started documenting them in 2019.

Most blue-colored frogs in the DC area are mutated [green tree frogs](#) (*Dryophytes cinera*). The first documented blue frog in our region appears to have been by Virginia photographer Mar Acevedo at Huntley Meadows Park on August 31, 2019. After several specimens were posted to iNaturalist, I asked Dr. Rayna Bell, a herpetologist who was working for the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., whether anyone was studying them. That simple query helped prompt her to create the [Aberrantly Blue Frogs](#) project on iNaturalist, which sparked the five-year global Blue Frog Project. The study found “over 300 records of axanthism in 36 species across the frog tree of life by leveraging iNaturalist observations.” Dr. Bell, now Curator of Herpetology at the California Academy of Sciences, and her colleagues are continuing their studies and hope to include some specimens from Huntley Meadows.

Read the full article by Barbara Saffir [here](#). Photo by Barbara Saffir.

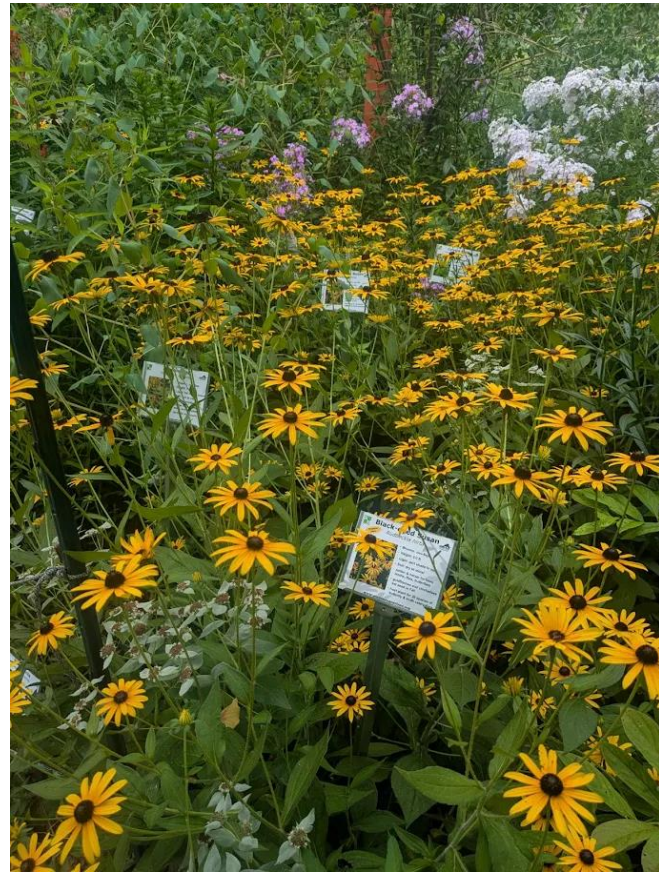
A Summer of Garden Explorers

The Arlington Central Library Native Garden features over a hundred species of native plants, many labeled by ARMN member Todd Minners. As shown in the photo at right, the garden showcases a wealth of plant diversity and beauty. Several dedicated ARMN members tend to the garden by watering, removing invasives, picking up trash, and pruning back aggressive native plants.

However, it can be easy for the average Arlingtonian heading into the library to miss the bountiful array of native plants right on the building's doorstep. To highlight the garden and introduce the littlest of citizens to the secrets of the natural world, naturalists Melissa Hauke, YuHsin Hsu, and Melissa Riggio teach in [Garden Explorers](#), a program for families and kids in rising grades 2 through 5. with three events in 2026 — “Native Plant Scavenger Hunt” on June 13, “Pollinators” on July 25, and “Seasons” on August 15.

In the library auditorium (shown in the photo at right), children were led through the beginning of each event by Melissa Hauke (in the purple shirt — Melissa Riggio is in white), who answered questions such as “Do pollinators only pollinate in spring?” and “Would we have clothes without pollinators?” At different events, children would line up behind the sign they felt represented the best answer to a naturalist-proposed question, or else they would place a sticker on the poster to choose the best answer. The hands-on nature of the activity kept their attention as they learned, and then the second half of each event brought them out into the garden to put it all into practice.

At the first event, children were tasked with finding pollinators for different plants, writing down the name of the plant and the pollinator (or perhaps drawing the plant and pollinator, if it suited them more). The students peered at the plants and their signposts, sometimes needing help from the naturalists in reading the plant names, but dutifully jotting down the name when read aloud. Some parents began asking for the best ways to introduce native plants into their yards. The naturalists gave advice, and a helpful sign in the garden detailed where to purchase native plants in our area.



At the second event, students were told to find out which pollinators were visiting which plants in the garden. Many bees were buzzing about, particularly flocking to the mountain mint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), where students struck gold (see photo below). They seemed particularly interested to learn that not only bees and butterflies are pollinators but also other creatures, such as moths, flies, mosquitos, and even bats.



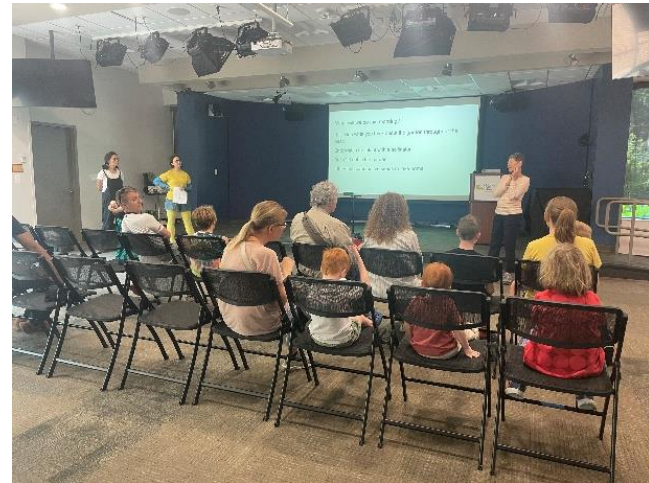
A highlight of the “Pollinators” event came when an eastern tiger swallowtail (*Papilio glaucus*) fortuitously landed on a buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) right as one of the naturalists was talking about how buttonbush attracts many pollinators, including butterflies. This caused much excitement among the students as the butterfly flitted from sphere-flower to sphere-flower on the bush.

Native plants were also given away at the “Pollinators” event, chosen by the students and parents based on advice given by the naturalists on what plants would survive under the lawn conditions described. Students and their parents were asked questions like, “Does your yard get a lot of sun?” and “What other plants are around it?” to give the plant a home best suited to it. Plants such as golden ragwort (*Packera aurea*), foxglove

beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*), and black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) were given away.

During the program on August 15, students talked about their favorite season, then transitioned to questions about how nature goes through different seasons (see photo at right). In the garden, children were excited to find pollinators on black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) flowers in full bloom as well as on New York ironweed (*Vernonia noveboracensis*). The naturalists wrapped up the program by giving the children the chance to plant their own native plant seeds and take them home.

The ARMN members are looking forward to another Garden Explorers program next year, and they hope the children are as well!



The article and photo of the library garden are by Melissa Riggio. The photos of the first class in the library auditorium and of kids hunting for pollinators are by YuHsin Hsu. The other class photo is by Michelle Biver of the library staff.

See Something, Say Something!

Recently, I was walking to the Mallston (aka Ballston Quarter) through a privately owned public space between several buildings, one of which was the Ballston Exchange. The public use area is a mix of public seating, landscaping beds, and trees outside of various restaurants and apartment entrances on either side.

Noticing what appeared to be small and unusual growths on the trees there (see photo), I used iNaturalist as well as additional research to learn that they were actually a kind of insect called calico scale (*Eulacanium serasorum*). The insect forms a shell ("scale") for protection from predators. Calico scale can damage trees by feeding on their sap and secreting mold-forming honeydew. After scanning every tree in the plaza, I realized that the insects were abundant on every single one. (Calico scale is native, but that doesn't mean that it is great for our native trees!)

Such privately owned public spaces have developers and management teams who very much want to keep their trees alive, something I picked up on while attending many [Site Planning Review Commission](#)

meetings as an Arlington County Park and Recreation Commissioner. Trees are expensive to plant and maintain in these spaces — any Tree Steward can tell you about the cost of tree maintenance in an urban heat island, especially where sunlight is blocked by tall buildings and not much root space is available. The property managers understand the value of biophilia and often use the natural aspects of such urban spaces as part of their pitches to get public opinion on their side. If the trees died, they would need to be replaced, which would be expensive and would leave public spaces looking terrible for a time — bad for public relations.

After construction is done, there aren't as many remaining "eyes on the ground." Maintenance obviously happens — these urban spaces do not stay the same if left to their own devices — but "see something, say something" can apply to the average citizen here too. The same way we would [report stormwater pollution](#), Arlingtonians can reach out about issues in spaces like this.

The first thing for me to do was to find out who was responsible for tree maintenance. I was told that it was the Ballston Exchange Management Office, which made sense,



given that the insect infestation was right outside the Ballston Exchange building. You can ask for such information by using the [Report a Problem tool](#) on the Arlington County website.

I sent the property management company an email with a picture of the calico scale insects attached, mentioning the concerns I had about the health of the trees. I didn't know whether they would actually respond; sometimes it feels like emailing general inboxes goes into a void. Unexpectedly, I got a nearly instant response from someone saying that they would contact their landscaping vendor about it. Out of curiosity, a week or so later I went back to the area to examine the trees — and the calico scale insects were gone. I examined every tree and could not find a single insect.

I am not sure I would have been able to use iNaturalist and other resources to identify calico scale and understand its potential damage to trees without my ARMN training. Nor would I have known about privately owned public spaces and the responsibility of property managers for their trees without my Park and Recreation Commission background and connections. I'm extremely glad to be able to use these two aspects of my community engagement in Arlington to help our natural resources, even in small instances like this!

Article and photo by Melissa Riggio.

Cleaning the Bay Starts Here

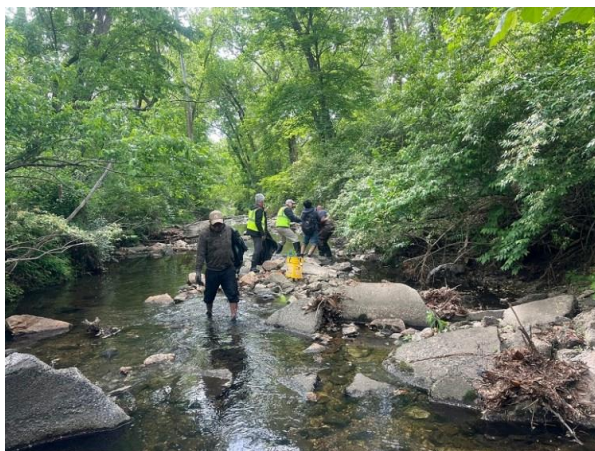
On May 2, 2026, “Clean the Bay Day” brought ARMN park stewards together to patrol the upper course of [Four Mile Run](#) through the five contiguous county parks they manage. Joined by ARMN volunteers led by Dominion Hills Park Steward Noreen Hannigan and a crew from Quetzal Lawn & Landscape, they pulled an electric scooter, a pair of lawn chairs, two tarps, three tires, an iron grate, two heavy pipes, and part of a large manhole cover from the stream. The team also filled several dozen large garbage bags with cans, plastic bags, extruded foam, plastic bottles, and candy wrappers.

ARMN park stewards are experienced volunteers who lead conservation work in high-priority natural areas in partnership with Arlington County and five other local jurisdictions. This year, we timed our stream cleanup of upper Four Mile Run with the cleanup day designated by the [Chesapeake Bay Foundation](#) because we believe that cleaning the bay starts upstream, right here in our local parks. We began our work about a block downstream from Fire Station 6 in Arlington, where Four Mile daylights from underground, and continued nearly two miles downstream.

Three dozen volunteers pulled junk from the stream in Isaac Crossman, Benjamin Banneker, and Madison Manor Parks; in Dominion Hills, we cleaned a section stretching from Washington Street in Falls Church to Arlington Mill Drive at the northwest end of Bon Air Park. In the middle of the cleanup area, 15 volunteers from the First Church of Christ, Scientist, pitched in with stream cleaning through East Falls Church Park. Volunteers also pulled invasive weeds, such as garlic mustard.

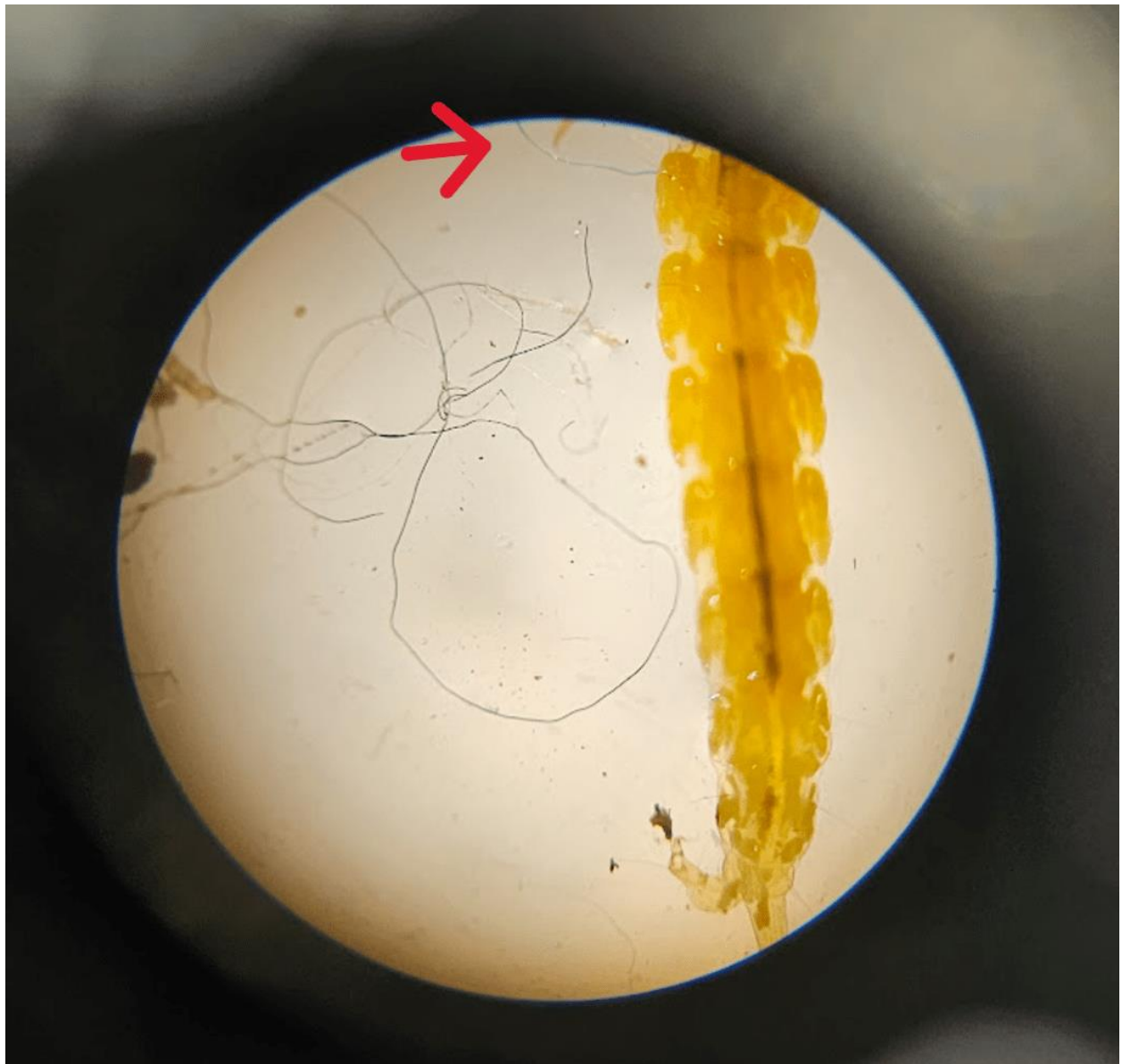
In all, 51 volunteers, including ARMN members, 12 crew members from Quetzal, 15 from the church, 5 Girl Scouts, and various neighbors contributed 157 hours of work to the stream cleanup. Arlington Park Manager Robert Upton loaned trash grabbers and arranged for debris collection, and it was a successful — and memorable — day in and along Four Mile Run.

Read the full story by Jo Allen [here](#). Photo of stream by Mikki Atsatt; photo of trash bags by Lydia Mooney.



Microplastics and Stream Critters

I have a background in plastic pollution research, so I made my presentation in my ARMN basic training class about microplastics. During my separate training in stream monitoring for macroinvertebrates, I saw something that only someone like me would notice — a blue synthetic microfiber nearly tangled around a caddisfly larva (see the photo below, red arrow).



Seeing a microfiber beside a living caddisfly made my research in microplastics suddenly feel all the more real. I waited until July to share this story as an ARMN blog to highlight [Plastic Free July](#), a global movement that encourages people to reduce single-

use plastics and think more intentionally about the products they use every day. Going completely plastic-free for a month is highly unrealistic for most of us, but even small changes matter, so I hope this story encourages readers to learn more about the plastic pollution problem.

Caddisflies (order Trichoptera) are tiny moth-like insects, but they start out as larvae (wormlike insects with legs) living underwater in freshwater streams. They graze on leaves, grasses, and algae on submerged rocks. Threatened by fast-moving stormwaters or fish trying to eat them, a type of caddisfly called a casemaker protects itself by carrying its home with it. Casemaker caddisflies produce silk that binds together tiny pebbles, sticks, leaves, and other materials into a portable protective tunnel-shaped case. The weight of the case keeps the caddisfly from being carried away by stormwaters and protects it from predators by looking like a bunch of pebbles (see the photo at right).



The fabrics people use are often made of polyester or other types of petroleum-based synthetic materials that are woven together. Little plastic threads are constantly shedding from our fabrics. These little plastic strands, called microfibers, easily end up in our local waterways. In northern Virginia, everything that washes down neighborhood storm drains eventually makes its way into local streams such as Four Mile Run, Long Branch, Holmes Run, and Donaldson Run before flowing into the Potomac River and ultimately into Chesapeake Bay. Caddisflies sometimes find microfibers on stream bottoms and incorporate them into their cases. Scientists are still studying how microplastics affect freshwater insects.

Read the full story by Joseph Barnes [here](#). Photo showing microfiber by Joseph Barnes; photo of caddisfly case and larva copyright S. Moorman (2014).

Good Read

***When Trees Testify: Science, Wisdom, History, and America's Black Botanical Legacy* by Beronda L. Montgomery (2026, 316 pages)**

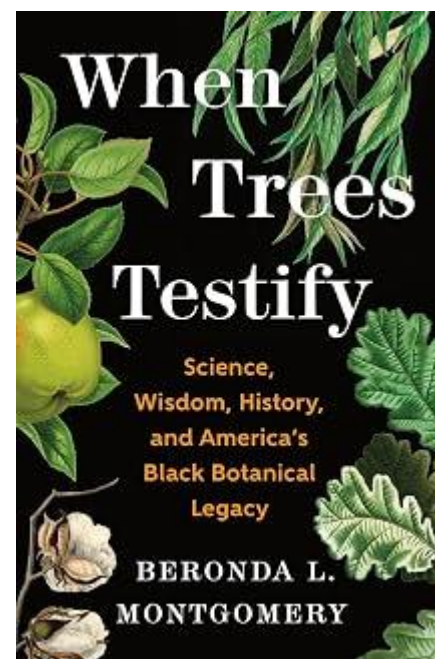
Dr. Beronda L. Montgomery is a researcher, professor, science communicator, and writer. She has a Ph.D. in plant biology from the University of California at Davis. Dr. Montgomery has written a beautiful and deeply educational book, perfect for those who love trees, history, and wide-ranging literary backdrops.

[*When Trees Testify: Science, Wisdom, History, and America's Black Botanical Legacy*](#) weaves together botany and dendrology with the history of enslavement and racialized trauma in this country. Dr. Montgomery uses the natural and social histories of six trees (poplar, pecan, willow, and others) as well as the cotton plant to tell a story of the enduring and often complex relationship between plants and Black history and culture. She illustrates the way in which plants and trees have shaped and been influenced by the experiences of Blacks in North America, including through food, cultural traditions, stolen labor, horrific violence, and more. In addition, Dr. Montgomery traces the long legacy of botanical expertise in Black culture extending far beyond the history of Black people in the United States.

The book covers the joy and the complicated history of butter pecan ice cream as well as the tragedy of trees that were used for lynchings and are still standing today. We learn about ancient trees on college campuses—several right here in Virginia—that served as informal school sites for Black children and communities. The book invites readers to confront hard truths about the history of botany and ecology in this country while learning more about and celebrating the many contributions of Black naturalists, many of whom became such through no choice of their own. Dr. Montgomery makes a compelling case that the soils, trees, and much of the natural world around us hold the memory of so much loss, violence, and trauma, meriting reflection and honor.

Dr. Montgomery's story takes us from plantations to laboratories, to her mother's and grandmother's kitchens, and to university campuses, leading us through painful and joyful childhood memories as well as fascinating research on the form and functions of local trees and plants. Beautifully written, lyrical at times and deeply rooted in environmental science, this book is truly a gift. I hope readers will come away with a renewed appreciation for the relationship between trees and human history as well as with a continued reverence for the heavy costs and complex layers of this country's founding.

Book review by Marianna Cardozo.



Know a good book your fellow naturalists might want to read? Write your own short book review [here](#).