

# Gardening on the Shore

Left to right, Janice Rivell, Jack Humphreys and Maureen Donnell on the job at the teaching garden in Eastville. ▼

Once they decided to relocate from Illinois to Virginia, Jack and Judy Humphreys next had to choose the area where they would live. Three out of four of their adult children lived in Virginia, and they wanted to be close to their offspring, but not too close. “We looked at the Eastern Shore right after February,” Jack said. “I saw a camellia in bloom and thought ‘this is the place for me.’”

They bought a large lot and built a home near Eastville in Northampton County nearly four years ago. “You could never grow a eucalyptus in Illinois,” he said, gazing lovingly at his “shrub that is trying to be a tree.” The eucalyptus is one of many plantings installed since the Humphreys have been in residence. The Eastern Shore is a finger of land bordered by the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, narrowing at its southern end. Close proximity to the water creates a moderate climate. Access is via the 17-mile Bay Bridge Tunnel.

A forester by training (University of Illinois, forestry management), Jack became a Master Gardener in 1995. While in Illinois he worked part-time at a garden center, participating in a radio program that took calls over the air. He also served as a panelist on a local public television garden show.

Once in Virginia, he soon joined the Eastern Shore Master Gardeners. So when radio station WESR came calling for a local gardening report, Jack was the natural choice. While he has a wealth of material at his fingertips, thanks to the resources of Virginia Tech, he also weaves his own experiences and challenges into his reports.

When a gardening magazine set about debunking some gardening myths, among them the assertion that newly planted trees should be staked, Jack mentioned the article—and the fact that he had discovered on his own that a tightly staked tree failed to develop strong root systems and once unstaked, could blow over.

The reports, about three minutes, always include the phone number of the Extension Office (757-414-0731) and invite people to call with questions or stop by the office in Exmore. If Jack has a mantra, it is “Read the label.” One woman sprayed a non-selective herbicide on her entire lawn to rid it of dandelions. “What should I do?” she wailed, having wiped out everything. “Start over,” said Jack. Mis-use of chemicals is one of his pet peeves.

“Over the years, the more I learn about people, the closer I come to being organic,” he said. “I don’t use insecticides, it’s not worth the effort—the benefits of not spraying outweigh the benefits of spraying. I don’t want to kill all the caterpillars.”

And if you’re eyeing those unsightly mounds of mums now, avoid what Jack calls the “Neat Nelly syndrome”—don’t cut the stems until spring, they will help protect the plants through the winter. “I wait until I see new growth, then I cut the stems off,” he said. “Besides, mounds of mums look nice in the snow.”



Photo courtesy of Nancy Fuchs.

But do tidy up the iris and peony beds now; they can harbor diseases and borers.

One of Jack’s challenges is one not frequently addressed—the change in soil after new construction. Compaction can create a new set of problems. Jack has moved some of his azaleas three times seeking better drainage. Two rain gardens planted no more than 100 feet from each other reacted differently. Rain gardens are depressions in the ground to catch runoff from roofs, sidewalks, driveways and compacted soil. They filter pollutants washed off these surfaces, an important task in areas near the Chesapeake Bay. One garden drained well, hosting many native flowers; the other, closer to compacted soil, now contains water lilies, pickerel weed and other water lovers.

When he’s not writing his script (he figures he’s done about 170) or planting and/or relocating shrubs and flowers, Jack and his fellow Master Gardeners maintain a demonstration and kitchen garden behind the historic Eastville Inn, a county property. The garden was started by locals, then abandoned. When the Master Gardeners stepped in three years ago, it was overgrown and full of weeds. Northampton County provides \$1,000 annually to the Master Gardeners for maintenance, a wise investment that yields an inviting spot to linger after dining at the inn or strolling through the historic Court Green. So inviting is it that last summer it was the site of a wedding.

Eastville Inn chef Charles Thain benefits, too—he uses the fresh herbs in his cooking. “He even waters the kitchen garden sometimes,” Bob said. “And us, too,” added weeding cohort Maureen Donnell who, along with Janice Rivell, joined us on our garden walkabout.

And while the trio appeared friendly and happy to talk about their activities, I could have sworn I detected a bit of concern on their part that if too many Virginians heard about their little Zone 8 paradise, they’d move there and things would get crowded. But some secrets are just too good to keep. ♡

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