

Small Garden: Small Stories

Do you find that your garden is an album of remembrance? There are so many of my plants that either grew from passalong bits or arrived in a pot as a gift that merely to walk around is to remember the kindness of dear friends and family. The sensitive fern that flourishes near the foundation of the back of the house and which covers a rug-size area of bad clay soil began as a clump from Mary Ann's wonderful garden.

Sensitive fern, *Onoclea sensibilis* has, in spring, long, deeply pinnated sterile fronds that appear from creeping rhizomes. The fertile fronds are two-pinnate with contracted bead-like black segments curled in to cover the sori and appear in late summer to last all winter. [I had to look up sori: a sorus is the cluster of sporangia usually on the underside of a fern frond. The tissue that covers the sori is called an indusium.] It is the right plant for that difficult place.

Last spring when I visited Carol Wilson's English garden, among its many delights was the annual Love-in-a-mist, *Nigella damascena*, a confection of white petals in a nest of needle fine foliage. Carol kindly gave me seeds and I scattered them. I often do that- and it's the end of the story. These seeds sprouted! What fun to see them grow and bloom.

They are near the *Rosa rugosa alba*, adding white to white. The only sprig of that rugosa foliage to have flowered this spring has had a rose red one? I hadn't realized the seedling was there and if 'alba' is not hybrid why was it not white?

My sunny flower bed is currently awash in uninvited *Lychnis coronaria*, (aka Dusty Miller, Rose Campion). Mine is not the brilliant cerise but white which may be all to the good as it grows amid rambling coreopsis and other determinedly yellow plants. From time to time I weed it out but there are so many bare spots those rosettes of grey wooly foliage make a good ground cover. It self-seeds generously but is shallow rooted so easily removed.

This plant originated in South East Europe but there are native members of the family. Jerusalem /Maltese cross, Ragged robin, alpine catchfly, Flower of Jove, German catchfly are other *Lychnis* that make good garden plants.

Don't you love it when someone introduces you to a plant you've never met? A friend found *Ornithogalum dubium* and wondered if it were hardy here. To begin, it is a yellow Star of Bethlehem. Of course when you hear the common name, you immediately think – bulbous perennial with white-veined mid-green basal leaves that wither by the time the racemes of long-stalked white stars open in summer. That Star of Bethlehem is *O. umbellatum*. One plus is that this old familiar one increases easily meaning it can move into your lawn without permission. Not a bad thing as the backs of the petals are curiously green and the white stars lovely, adding interest to plain grass.

O. dubium syn. *O. florescens*, *O. trinatum*, is also a perennial bulb with four inch basal leaves and from winter to spring bears racemes of up to 25 star- to cup-shaped flowers. They are usually yellow, orange, or red and rarely white. Originally from South Africa, they are happy in our zone 7 and south to zone 10. These types are not tall, being a foot or so high but *O. narbonne* has longer basal leaves and its white fluorescence reaches from 18" to 36". *Ornithogalum* does best in full sun.

Another plant that, once permitted within the garden gate, is a permanent resident is *Oenothera*, the Evening primrose or Sundrop. When they appear you may not know which of the 125 species you have as they are annual, biennial, perennial and they seed themselves lavishly. Native to North America they range from mountain to desert. My neighbor has a swathe of pink, mine are yellow, both sorts have four-petaled cup-shaped flowers with cross-shaped stigma.

Years ago a dear friend gave me *Stoksia*, Stokes' aster, and unlike other treasures from kind friends, this one I have not killed by either too much or too little attention. The fat sassy cornflower bloom lasts a long time and the basal rosettes are large and tidy with a paler green rib down the center of the leaf. If you have them near the edges of the flower bed it will be easier to do the deadheading that prolongs the bloom. You can say that, like your most casual friends, your most casual plants will appreciate a little TLC.