

## Spring's Small Notes

Surely the best way to greet this beloved season is to go outdoors and poke about the leaf piles to see what is there. Some gardeners have a photographic memory for the placement of each bulb and every plant in their garden. I don't: my effort to clear away and clean up in March results in an avalanche of surprises! So beguiled by the reappearance of tiny fragrant Narcissus 'Sailboat', I forget I'm on the way to add to the branch pile. I have to stop by the oak leaf hydrangea to feel the velvety beginnings of the seafoam bluegreen leaves. Then a side trip to the 'woods' on my small lot to admire the solitary blue hyacinth and look for the blue primrose that used to be along that path.

Not a surprise that the neatly pleated tufts of daylily foliage have been nibbled down by this spring's crop of bunnies. Every chore takes twice its allotted time, but chores are a constant and these renewing surprises are so brief! Things die despite our hope and care but other plants become finer than expected or deserved. We learn gardens can be coaxed but not controlled- like life.

A friend gave me an iris bloom in early March but its appearance is not at all like that of the early spring blooming *I. reticulata* although it does have the same square stems. The two leaves clasping a bulbous stem are flat and narrow. I put it in a vase on the kitchen counter while I sorted through a mountain of mail and I kept looking through slick pages for a perfume ad. Finally, finding no bit of perfumed paper, I realized it was the iris.

Not only does this tiny flower have stiff opalescent pale green standards and nearly black falls, it has an exotic fragrance! My friend said it was called a snake iris – a term I haven't been able to find even searching through pages of sparkling pictures and dull prose. Neither bearded nor crested, it remains a mystery.

### FOR A LONG WEEKEND

I know, it is so lovely right here right now, we haven't the urge to leave, but in case you wish for a change, the National Arboretum is just up the road in Washington, D.C. "Your tax dollars at work" – the first time I saw the phrase in the headlights was on one of Washington's circumferential highways in the 60s, a term dissolved to 'beltway' fortunately. Since 'tax' has become a dirty word, not a lot of credit is given to places like the US National Arboretum.

One of several research programs under the auspices of the National Arboretum is the woody landscape plant germplasm repository. Both public and private resources are used to preserve essential plant genetic diversity, needed to combat new and emerging pests as well as diseases that threaten the US ecosystems. The National Arboretum Herbarium, established at the beginning of the 1900s, contains documented specimens of plant introductions. Their scope is wide, encompassing any plant used for food and medicine as well as 'just what grows' border to border. Of worldwide importance, the herbarium is a tremendous boost to ornamental horticulture, one of the fastest growing segments of the US economy.

The National Arboretum is also instrumental in developing guidelines for growing techniques for improved species and environmentally sound cultivation. Working in concert with the nursery trade the National Arboretum has patented products useful in control of disease and improvement of cultivars. By identifying the DNA markers of plants, this research has contributed to the necessary knowledge of native and other species.

A visit to the Arboretum (3501 New York Ave. NE, Washington, D.C. 20002) ([www.usna.usda.gov](http://www.usna.usda.gov)) will introduce you to 12,000 plants, some of them bound to be unfamiliar! The hours are 8 to 5 and it is open daily except for Christmas Day. I have never been there. Perhaps I am waiting for the transportation gurus to extend the metro to Gloucester Courthouse.