

Welcome the Wildlings

In your garden poor housekeeping may be its own reward. Although a modicum of order is restful, excessive order can be boring. There is a wanton grace in those blooms that just appear.

Years ago I tried to transplant a flowering orange butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*: it promptly died. Butterfly weed has a long stubborn taproot so resents being moved. In my present garden several clumps have simply appeared over the years, some of them bordering the boxwood, artistically a questionable combination but I'll not uproot them.

This spring one of those hot color clumps is cooled by stems bearing small lavender-blue flowers that have risen amid the butterfly weed foliage. None of the books I've consulted have convinced me I know for sure what it is. The flowers resemble miniature snapdragons with white on the lower apron and the top part a hoodie. It is probably Hyssop skullcap, *Scutellaria integrifolia* as it has a hump on the calyx and the stem is square. Whatever it is, I hope it comes back.

Other wildlings are those that have escaped from that one plant you tucked in years ago and now find everywhere. I had one plant of *Anemone virginiana*, the native thimbleweed and now there are several at quite a distance from the bare spot that held the original. It has anemone foliage but the high-reaching flower lacks petals. It has white sepals and a lively display of pistils and stamens. If the rabbits don't eat it, when the flower fades the fruit develops and looks like a lady's thimble.

Some wildflowers come and go: some years there is a cardinal flower in a damp place with clay soil and straggly ferns and most years there are towering stems of New York Ironweed. To bring the ironweed's purple sprays closer to eye level it can be cut back midsummer. These volunteers are too hit and miss to be termed 'garden' but they attract birds and butterflies.

Putting away tools last week I thought the *Coreopsis* needed dead-heading and put it on the morning's mental 'to-do' list. At breakfast time a delight to look out the kitchen window and watch a pair of goldfinches tussling with those seed heads – a reminder to leave well enough alone!

Deptford pinks play hop-scotch through the borders. With a low basal tuft and a taller, to 18" stem with a hot pink, five-petaled flower, it is *Dianthus armeria*. In England it is known as God's flower, a translation from the Latin *dianthus*. It is surely wild as it comes and goes but it is not native to Virginia. One wildflower manual spoke of the white spots on the tiny ragged petals. They require a magnifying glass to find, but then, you'd never look for them in the first place had you not been told they were there.

Spiderwort, Venus looking glass, blue-eyed grass – all these pretty natives appear each year but rarely in the same place. Spiderwort, *Tradescantia subaspera*, is easily cut back to rebloom if the foliage gets leggy. In "Wildflowers of the Blue Ridge Parkway" it is reported that 'spider' refers to the way the plant looks due to the angular arrangement of the leaves. After a stern look at many plants I find no such arrangement of leaves: 'relaxed' is the least favorable description.

The other suggestion is that the plant could cure the bite of the phalangium spider. "The question is academic, however, because the phalangium spider is quite harmless". Further information in the text suggests spiderwort be used as a pollution detection device as the blossoms turn from blue to pink within two weeks after having been exposed to severe levels of pollutions. *Tradescantia* is also good fill-in plant for perennials that prefer their roots cool, like *Clematis*, for example.

Perhaps it was the mild winter but along with more ticks and poison ivy, there are more wild things. May apples abound, coming out earlier. Spotted wintergreen holds its own amid the rampant vinca. That last vine is one everyone has and no one admits planting. The blue flowers a lovely complement to early daffodils but it can strangle weaker plants.

Another 'once-planted-have-forever' is the yellow or pink Oenothera. It is easily pulled out when the cup-shaped 'poppy' flowers fade and a few seeds will have escaped to assure a crop next year. This is not the evening primrose but the sundrop version of Oenothera, but the species has probably interbred promiscuously: the plant behavior does not match-up well with the word of authoritative sources.