

Conservation Corner

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The Earth laughs in flowers. Ralph Waldo Emerson

The last day of May and spring is coming to a close in an explosion of laughing color, thanks in part to the many irises now blooming in area gardens and wetlands. Members of the family *Iridaceae*, irises are named for the Greek word for rainbow. Growing and flowering throughout the northern hemisphere, irises have long been a symbol in the world of art, national identities, even the world of sports. Perhaps you're familiar with van Gogh's painting "Irises in the Garden" or the fleur-de-lis emblem as found on the French flag or the helmets of the New Orleans Saints.

Irises have also long been a favorite symbol in flower gardens. With over 300 varieties to choose from, there's an iris for everyone. This week's plant friend will be an Iowan native, the blue flag iris, *Iris shrevei*, as grown in Sylvan T. Runkel and Dean M. Roosa's guidebook *Wildflowers and Other Plants of Iowa Wetlands*.

The blue flag iris, also known as blue flag or fleur-de-lis, is found from Quebec to Minnesota and south to North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kansas. They grow throughout the Hawkeye state but are especially common in north-central Iowa where they flourish in wet, marshy soils along lakes and streams.

Blue flag irises feature sword-shaped leaves that grow up to an inch wide and 3 feet long and clasp the base of the branched flower stalk. Its rootstock is a fleshy, horizontal rhizome which contains a toxic substance, iridin, that imparts an unpleasant flavor.

Their blue-violet flowers, which appear in late May and June, are slender, smaller versions of domestic or garden iris blooms. Although at first glance the flower appears to have nine petals, in reality it is three petals, three sepals, and three branches of the style that arch over the pollen-producing stamens to prevent self-pollination. Each plant may have up to six showy flowers which are enclosed in two or more papery bracts, while its fruit is a three-lobed oblong capsule containing six rows of seeds.

Native Americans used the iris to treat earache, sore eyes, respiratory problems, and liver ailments. They also pounded the boiled root to a pulp and used it as a dressing to relieve swelling and pain from sores and bruises.

Here in Pocahontas County, blue flag irises may be found blooming in many of our prairie pothole areas including the Varina Wetland Complex. In addition to plants, these native habitats are also home to many colorful butterflies. Conservation invites everyone to an IBSN Butterfly Survey Walk on Saturday, June 17. Join us at 9:30 a.m. at the PCCB Nature Center to carpool, or you may meet us at the Westmoreland Wetland parking lot 1½ miles north of Varina at 10:00 a.m. Reservations are appreciated! Call 335-4395 or email conservation@pocahontas-county.com to sign up. Allow an hour for the walk. We trust the images and winged colors of the land will not fade so quickly.

