Opinion

This tiny flower teaches us all we need to know about growing old

By Dana Milbank
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April 26, 2024

For most of my life, I marked the progress of spring by its blooms. First came the crocuses of February and the daffodils of March, followed, in quick succession, by the tulips and hyacinth, the lilac and flowering cherry and the saucer magnolias. Later, the azaleas would explode in a pink and red riot — and, before long, the peonies would unfurl to proclaim the approach of summer. Each arrival announced itself with a spectacular burst of color and, often, a sweet perfume that filled the yard.

But lately I've come to share the view of Wendy Cass, the head botanist at Shenandoah National Park, when she sees a waving clump of daffodils.

"Boring," she says.

What I had been watching all those years was spring as humans made it. This year, I'm experiencing spring as God made it.

Those tulips, lilacs and all the rest were imported from Europe and Asia, curated and genetically manipulated by humans so they would grow with no effort and display improbably sweet and showy blooms. They are beautiful, no question, and I will always smile when I see a host of golden daffodils as Wordsworth did, "Beside the lake, beneath the trees/ Fluttering and dancing in the breeze."

But this year, I've instead been walking in the still-bare forest and looking for Dutchman's breeches.

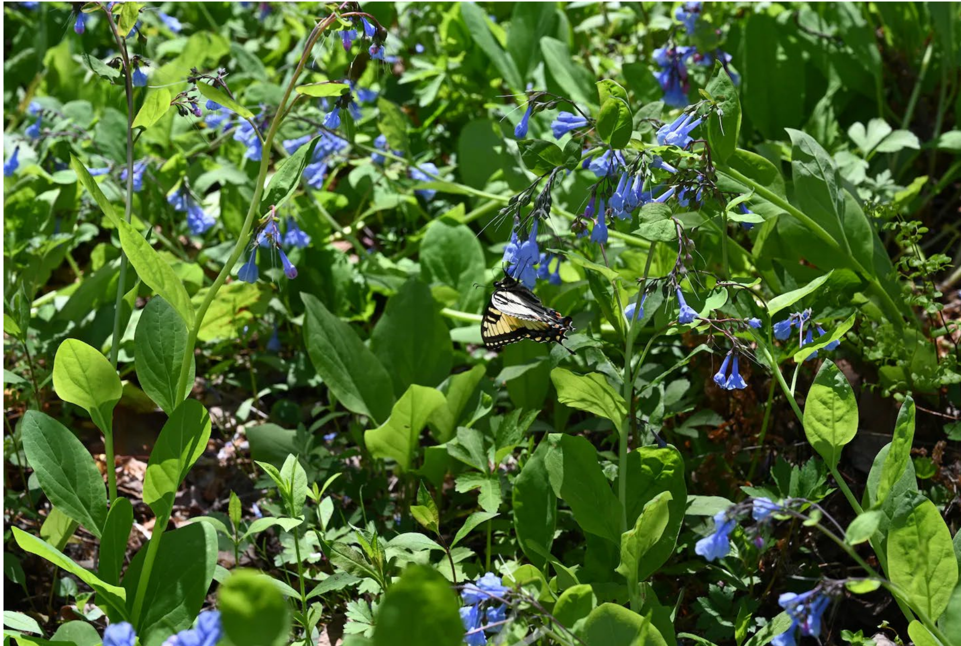
In case you are wondering why some European left his pants in the woods, let me explain that the Dutchman's breeches is my new favorite flower. Its bloom, just a half-inch tall, looks like an upside-down pair of white pantaloons, belted at the waist with a yellow rope. Native to this part of the eastern United States, it's one of the first wildflowers of spring, popping up in late March or early April, flowering for a couple of weeks and disappearing as quickly as it came. Its entire growing season — from the time its first green shoot emerges from the earth to the moment its last bit of green foliage dies for the year — is just a couple of months.

The blooms of Dutchman's breeches, just half an inch tall, resemble an upside-down pair of white pantaloons, belted at the waist with a yellow rope. Yet so much life comes from those delicate trousers. It's one of the first foods in the forest after a long winter, and a crucial bit of sustenance for the queen bumblebee. When she emerges from her overwintering nest in the ground (the other bees die during the winter), she stretches her long tongue into the Dutchman's breeches to reach its nectar, which nourishes her as she lays the eggs that will replenish the colony with the next generation of workers.

The Dutchman's breeches are part of a class of plants felicitously known as "spring ephemerals." They appear on the forest floor before the trees have leafed out, taking advantage of the sunlight. They flower, go to seed and die back within just six to 12 weeks. These are flowers you generally won't find at florists: They are bluebells and bloodroot, trout lilies and toothwort, spring beauties and rue anemone. They are joined by other flowers that, while not "true" ephemerals (their foliage lasts a bit longer), generally share the same category: the great white trillium, hepatica, star chickweed and mayapple.

They are notoriously difficult to cultivate, hard to transplant and even harder to grow from seeds. It can take seven years from the time a trillium seed is planted to the appearance of just one of its three-petal flowers. Ephemerals are finicky and fussy plants, growing only in forests and typically near streams. They aren't as bold and colorful as garden-variety flowers, and most don't even have a scent. You won't spot spring ephemerals from your car window with an "ooh" and an "ah." To find them, you have to go on a treasure hunt in the forest. Their flowers can be tiny — sometimes just a millimeter or two — and you could easily miss them if you don't look carefully.

That is just the point.


Bluebells in bloom. (Dana Milbank/The Washington Post)

“The more you stand and stare at the ground, the more you see,” Cass said as we stood in the forest this week. She pointed out an early meadow rue that was just unfurling, then a sessile-leaf bellwort emerging, then a trillium in bloom. “Just stand still for a few minutes and you’ll discover.”

Her advice for spotting the spring ephemerals seemed as applicable to life as to botany. “Don’t be so focused on your destination or you’ll miss the good stuff,” she recommended. “Look around. Slow down. Even when you think you’ve seen everything, you haven’t.”

Spring ephemerals have been one of my happy discoveries as I’ve begun rehabilitating the neglected farm my wife and I bought in the Virginia Piedmont in 2022. Mostly, I’ve been discovering that everything I thought I knew about nature and gardening was wrong. In the case of these spring wildflowers, I realize that the knockout colors and fragrances I had associated with the natural world in my urban existence were, in fact, caricatures. In the wild, beauty is more subtle and more delicate — but it is also more satisfying.

As I grow older, I find that this is true of life generally. It becomes clearer to me with each birthday that we are all spring ephemerals. We are here for just a short time. We sprout, we flower, we go to seed, we disappear. But, as the years race by, I am also learning to find beauty not just in bold colors but in subtler hues. The sublime is with us in every season, if we only pause long enough to take it in.

The metaphor continues, for the spring ephemeral is so much more than its fleeting life above ground would suggest. Their root systems, under the surface, work actively well after their foliage has disappeared; spreading and storing resources in rhizomes, or corms, so they can push out new growth at the first sign of spring. And the ephemerals are deeply interconnected. An individual plant can live for 20 or 30 years, but a colony of spring ephemerals can take a century to form. These colonies can expand for hundreds of yards along a stream. But while the wildflowers thrive in their community, if you dig up one and transplant it away from its colony, it is unlikely to survive.

The spring ephemerals are connected as well to the animals in the forest. The queen bee needs her Dutchman's breeches. The mayapple spreads through the poop of box turtles, who, within their digestive tracts, prepare the seeds to germinate. Bloodroot is spread by ants, who carry off a tasty part of the plant called the elaiosome and then discard the seeds. The trout lily and spring beauty rely on solitary bees for pollinating. The wild columbine depends on hummingbirds.
On our treasure hunt, Cass had by now shown me a large colony of mayapples and several Solomon's seals just beginning to sprout.
I spied a white bud at my feet. "Ooh! Another trillium!" I called out to her, and she concurred.

It was worth a thousand daffodils.

A great white trillium in bloom. (Dana Milbank/The Washington Post)

It's National Arbor Day on Friday, a good time to pose a question that has occurred to me this spring: Did Johnny Appleseed have an orthopedist?

The real-life person who inspired the legend, John Chapman, grew thousands of acres of trees from seed, selling the seedlings to settlers in the early 19th century before he died (of exposure, supposedly) in 1845. I planted 30 trees this spring and it just about broke me.
For a year and a half, I had been killing off invasive brush on the farm, and this spring it was time to start planting some native trees. Unlike the spring ephemerals, these are easy to grow: Just add water. And yet, even in this relatively simple task, I made a serious miscalculation. If planting a small tree was good, I figured, planting a big tree would be better.

I got in touch with White House Natives, a tree nursery in Luray, Va., checked their price list and ordered myself 15 bagged-and-burlap trees: five American sycamores, two white oaks, two red oaks, two pignut hickories and the rest Virginia and loblolly pines. The catalogue said the trunks were 1½ to 1¾ inches in diameter, which sounded manageable. It was not manageable.

The first sign of trouble came when the guy at the tree farm told me I'd need a 26-foot moving truck to pick up my trees. The second sign came when I learned that the root balls, 18 inches deep and 24 inches wide, weigh some 300 pounds each. I panicked and tried to scale back my order. The guy at the nursery said they had already dug up the trees for me; there was no backing out.

So I decided that, to dig the holes, I would rent a "towable hydraulic auger" from Home Depot. I towed it to the farm behind my minivan. The instructions said it could be operated by one person — and it could be. But it weighed 295 pounds and was meant to be moved from hole to hole by a tractor, which I don't have. So I had to pull and push it, manually, up and down hills. The result was much like in "Fiddler on the Roof" when Tevye's horse goes lame and he has to pull the milk cart himself.

For a full day, I drilled and sweated and cursed. I severed an underground electrical line. (It wasn't hot, as evidenced by the fact that I am writing this.) I left the landscape looking as though hundreds of groundhogs had taken over the place.

Things didn't improve when I showed up at the tree farm with my U-Haul. Loading each tree required the efforts of a Bobcat and two large men with grappling hooks. Unloading it myself, without equipment, was going to be impossible. In my driveway, I promptly grounded the U-Haul while backing it over a berm, and spent the next hour digging it out and cursing some more. I shoved two of the trees off the back of the U-Haul then went inside for some Advil, and placed a call to a local guy who has a tractor, begging him to rescue me. With his John Deere, we hauled the trees from the truck and, finally, I wrestled them into the holes. I then called all the spas within 40 miles and asked for the earliest opening for a deep-tissue massage.

Trees being loaded for transport at White House Natives in Luray, Va. (Dana Milbank/The Washington Post)

There had to be an easier way — and there was. My next 15 trees (mostly dogwoods, serviceberry and redbuds) came from Hill House Nursery in Castleton, Va. Two or three feet tall and in one- and two-gallon pots, they were easy to plant. The hard part was putting up the cages to keep the deer from devouring them — and now watering them once a week. I'm told that in a few years they will have caught up to the bagged-and-burlap trees that just about broke my back.

But, in the end, even these labors proved to be unnecessary. It turns out I could have hundreds of trees planted at the farm by others — for free! The local Soil and Water Conservation District, using federal and state funds, covers most of the cost. A Virginia nonprofit, Friends of the Rappahannock, covers the rest and hires contractors to do the planting. The logic: It's in the public interest to reforest private land, particularly "riparian buffers" near rivers, as my place is.

To be sure, they're only tiny seedlings, a quarter-inch in diameter. It takes all of 30 seconds to plant a seedling: make a few shallow cuts into the ground, stick the tiny bare roots in the hole, and cover the plant with a four-foot, translucent tube, where it will (hopefully) grow, protected, for the next few years until it is ready to bust out. With care and luck, as many as 80 percent will survive.

On Wednesday of this week, Friends of the Rappahannock did my planting, a combination of oak, sycamore, persimmon, black cherry, birch and dogwood. The little guys are hardly bigger than spring ephemerals right now, and the green tubes are not much to look at. On the other hand, I just "planted" upward of 850 trees — two acres' worth — without any cursing or Advil. Now, I can instead spend my time walking the forest in pursuit of that elusive pink lady's slipper orchid. I bet it's somewhere near the Dutchman's breeches.

Carolyn Smith, who lives in Virginia's Madison County, has the closest thing there is to a cultivated spring ephemeral garden. (Dana Milbank/The Washington Post)

Alternatively, I can go to visit Carolyn Smith. There aren't many wildflowers on my farm (years of untreated invasives crowded out everything) but Smith, who lives in Madison County, Va., has the closest thing there is to a cultivated spring ephemeral garden. Her parents began planting bluebells and trillium along a small creek, and, over two generations, the collection has slowly grown to some 100 varieties of spring wildflowers.

On our first walk, in late March, she introduced me to Dutchman's breeches ("they're the cutest little things!") and a blue carpet of hepatica, just six inches off the forest floor. The trout lily displayed its long, yellow flowers, and the little white bloodroot flowers were already going to seed.

I returned two weeks later to find an entirely different landscape in the same place. The bluebells had exploded, and eastern tiger swallowtail butterflies feasted on their nectar. Smaller blue flowers, Jacob's ladder, had popped, along with purple woodland phlox and dainty, blue and yellow bluets. The eastern shooting stars unfurled their long, white petals. Marsh marigolds blanketed sections in orange, and tiny foam flowers fringed the stream.

Smith got to the blue cohosh, which two weeks earlier hadn't yet bloomed — and now it was already gone. "Rats!" she said. "It was here three days ago." Still to come in the next couple of weeks: the purple showy orchids, the striped hood of the jack-in-the-pulpit and the lady's slipper. After that, "the show will be over," she said.

Smith dares not travel this time of year, for fear of missing a bloom. "You've got to grab it while it's here," she advised, "because soon it will be gone."

It's a life lesson, taught by the flowers of the forest floor.

Opinion by Dana Milbank
Dana Milbank is an opinion columnist for The Washington Post. He sketches the foolish, the fallacious and the felonious in politics. His new book is "The Destructionists: The 25-Year Crackup of the Republican Party" (Doubleday).