LAST year the possibility arose that a skiing area might be developed on a large piece of mountain countryside in Highland County, on the northwest side of Jack Mountain. My husband was asked to join a group from the Game Commission (who own some of this land) which was looking into the pro’s and con’s of the idea. Since he was unfamiliar with the land involved, he was keen to explore it, and so we made a family trip up there. By a happy chance, we chose one of the prettiest days of the whole spring, and we had a wonderful time. It is a beautiful mountain and we had it completely to ourselves. And I have never before seen such a marvelous collection of wildflowers in bloom in such profusion. We found not just an isolated Trillium here and there, but great patches of three different species. There were extensive clumps of fringed polygala, carpets of sweet-smelling lilies-of-the-valley, a lovely mauve clematis and lots of little irises.

There are two species of dwarf irises which can be found in this state and both of them are spring bloomers. *Iris verna*, the one illustrated here, is smaller and flowers a little earlier. Sometimes known as the vernal iris, and sometimes simply as the dwarf iris, its flower stalks are only 3” to 6” high and the leaves seldom over 8”. *Iris cristata*, the dwarf crested iris, has about the same sized flower stalks but the leaves are quite a bit longer. As with all irises, the flower parts of both species are in threes. The three sepals and three petals are colored alike, blue or mauve, and all look like petals. The sepal characteristics are some of the main features which distinguish between the two species. In *I. verna* there is a longitudinal orange mark running down the center of each sepal. In *I. cristata* there is a conspicuous crest near the base of the sepal; the crest is whitish with a fringed purple outline and provides the reason for the name “crested.” All iris flowers have their parts united at the base into a slim tube. Below this, what might be mistaken for a calyx of sepals is in fact a spathe, formed by several dry, papery bracts which surround the calyx and the corolla and the rest of the flower. The single style divides into three branches which are also colored like petals and which overhang three concealed stamens. Thus an iris flower has nine elements which look like petals, but only three of which really are. Irises are monocotyledons; their leaves are grasslike. Each leaf is folded lengthwise along its midrib, enclosing the next younger leaf which faces towards it. *Iris verna* has very narrow leaves, another feature distinguishing it from *I. cristata*, where the leaves may be as much as an inch in breadth.

*I. verna* grows from long, slender rhizomes which run along the surface of the ground. It blooms from March through May in rocky, open woods and sandy, peaty places where the soil is very acid. It is essentially a mid-Atlantic species, ranging mainly from Maryland to South Carolina, in the pine barrens of the coastal plain and outer Piedmont. There is a distinct variety, var. Smalliana, which is found in the mountains, growing under slightly less acid conditions. The rhizomes are shorter and hence the flowers grow in more dense clumps.

The crested dwarf iris has rhizomes which run just below the surface of the ground. It prefers rich woods, wooded bottoms and ravines or bluffs. It is not usually found in bloom until late April or May. It needs only moderately acid soil, and is easier to transplant than *I. verna*. My friends Mr. and Mrs. Grover Pitts do have both species in their lovely wildflower garden, but they admit that the vernal iris seldom really thrives after moving.

Iris flowers have many associations with mythology and literature. Iris herself was a messenger of the gods whose visible sign was the rainbow. Some say she was actually the rainbow, and some say that the rainbow was the road down which she walked. In pictures she

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Dwarf Irises

is usually shown with wings, carrying a pitcher and a herald’s staff. Iris flowers get their name from her because they display just about every color of the rainbow.

The fleur-de-lis is a stylized iris flower. It is probably *I. pseudacorus*, the yellow iris of Europe which has been introduced into this country and is now widespread. The fleur-de-lis was the emblem of French royalty before the French revolution, and always appeared on the banners of French kings.

I do not know of any irises which are edible. Some are not only inedible but actually dangerous. *I. versicolor*, the common blue flag, is sometimes known as the poison flag. Its roots contain a poison called *irisin* which is violently emetic and cathartic and may be fatal. However, some irises do produce a commercially useful chemical. “Orris-root” powder comes from *I. florentina*, *I. germanica* or *I. pallida*. It smells like violets and is used in perfumes and medicines.

May is a good month for wildflowers. Watch out for dwarf irises if you are fortunate enough to find a suitable location. If not, enjoy all the other wildflower color there is around; and remember what Alfred Lord Tennyson says in Locksley Hall:

“In the spring a livelier iris changes on the
burnish’d dove

In the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns
to thoughts of love.”