

The Beauty is in the Details

How often do we hear the phrase the ‘Devil is in the Details’? The phrase highlights how the success of a project hinges on the many small details that often are overlooked. No project is certainly more befitting of this phrase than the creation of a successful garden. One such detail that always brings surprise and beauty is the unexpected appearance of flowers from bulbs, corms or other geophytes we long forgot adding to the garden. It was on a trip to Stonecrop, the home and garden of financier and horticulturist Frank Cabot (1925-2011) that I was first introduced to *Prospero autumnalis*, commonly known as Autumn Squill. With flower adorned stems only reaching 8-12” tall in July into August and September (as seen on the right), Autumn Squill provides a small ‘Detail’ that adds big ‘Beauty’ to the garden!

Despite its small stature, *Prospero autumnalis* is native throughout a broad territory, stretching from the United Kingdom South to Portugal and East to Turkey and the Caucasus. It is also a genus surrounded with much confusion, starting with its family heritage. It is currently considered to be in the subfamily Scilloideae, which is placed within the Asparagaceae or the Asparagus family. Formerly, the subfamily Scilloideae was known as Hyacinthaceae or the Hyacinth family and it is not unusual to see the plant still listed as a member of this family. It’s location in this subfamily is logical as the bulb was originally named *Scilla* in 1753 by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). The name comes from the Latin of the same name and the Greek *Skilla*. It was the name used in the distant past by botanists, naturalists and authors such as Theophrastus (371-287 BC), who is often called the father of botany and later by the naturalist Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD) to describe a bulbous plant. Although the plant described by Theophrastus and others was a totally different plant, Linnaeus adopted the name for what became a genus containing upwards of 80 species at one point in time. Currently many species such as *Prospero* have been teased out into different genera and *Scilla* now contains around 30 species. The species epithet describes how it blooms during the later part of the summer and into the early fall.



The genus name of *Prospero* was published posthumously by the English botanist Richard Salisbury (1761-1829) in 1866. Born Richard Anthony Markham, he was a very contentious figure in the world of botany, and although he made notable botanical advances, his rejection of the principles outlined by Linnaeus and accusations of plagiarism resulted in confrontational disputes with other botanists. As a result, his observations were often overlooked or discarded. In his 1866 publication *The Genera of Plants*, Salisbury suggested shifting 4 species of *Scilla* native to North Africa to the genus *Prospero*. The inspiration for the genus name remains a mystery, although it has been suggested the district in Italy named San Prospero was the

inspiration while others consider the magician Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* provided the namesake.

However, he did not entertain changing the name of *Scilla autumnalis* which remained untouched until 1982. At this time, the genus was under much scrutiny by the Austrian botanist Franz Speta (1941-2015). Speta was a specialist in bulbs and took a particular interest in *Scilla*. He noticed many species of the genus were sufficiently unique to be placed into different and more appropriate genera. He suggested placing this species of *Scilla* into the genus *Prospero*, which is now accepted by most in the botanical community. Currently, *Prospero* contains approximately 12 species. However, adding to the confusion and interest surrounding Autumn Squill is the tremendous genetic variation found within this apparent 'species.' This variation led Speta and other botanists to determine many additional and visually indistinguishable species



remain as yet undetected. Technically, this is called a Cryptic Species Complex whereby various plants can have different types and numbers of chromosomes, such as diploids versus tetraploids or different DNA in the chloroplasts yet, they remain identical in appearance. Regardless, although the genetics vary and the species is most likely an umbrella for a number of different species, the plants appear virtually identical to the gardener!

Regardless of the number of unrecognized species, *Prospero autumnalis* also remains largely unrecognized by most gardeners and is certainly a plant worth searching out in catalogues or rare plant nurseries. *Prospero* as a genus grows and overwinters from true bulbs, consisting of layers of modified leaves much like an onion. The narrow, straplike foliage is ¼" wide by 6-8" long and appears in mid to late March. The leaves are initially dark red in color while first emerging, changing to green with a red base (as seen above) before turning to all green by May. By late May the foliage has become somewhat flaccid or floppy and by mid-July, much of the initial foliage has faded with only a few leaves laying limp atop the ground.

Starting in mid to late July in Northern New Jersey, it is common to see flower stems starting to appear, often accompanied by a few fresh new leaves. Each bulb produces from one to four flowering stems, stretching from six to twelve inches tall. They are topped by floral racemes that range from one to four inches long and



contain from 5-30+ pink or violet flowers. A floral raceme is defined as an unbranched



inflorescence that bears flowers with short pedicels or floral stalks along its length. Each flower has 3 petals and 3 sepals that look identical and are termed tepals. On the selection that I bought and the subsequent seedlings that have appeared, the buds are a bright purplish pink, with a bright Leprechaun green cap (as seen above). On close inspection, the buds are held upright with the pedicel curving upwards much like the stem of a Williamsburg wall scone. As the flower buds open, the orientation changes from projecting upwards to outwards as the pedicels proceed to straighten into an outward orientation from the stem as seen above and at left. As the 6 tepals open, they reflex backward and develop into a star-shaped flower nearly 3/8" in diameter. Each tepal is somewhat oval in shape and bright pink in color with a slight green blush at the tips (as seen at left). From the base of each tepal arises a stamen, with light pink filaments and yellow anthers. At the center is a very pale pink ovary from which emerges one nearly white style

and stigma. Following pollination, the pedicels gradually return to an upright orientation and the 1/8" central ovary transitions to green as it slowly grows into a 3-chambered seed capsule.

Come September, the now 1/4" diameter tan seed capsule splits open at the top to reveal 3 urn-shaped seed chambers with each containing 2 black seeds stacked one upon the other. As the



capsule blows about in the wind, the seeds are ejected. In the 9 years that I have grown the plant, I have found numerous seedlings around the originally plants, although one seedling appeared nearly 5' distant! Plants grow best in full sun and well-drained soils and I have seen numerous seedlings thriving in a gravel walk in my home garden. The plants increase in size through the production of offsets and are hardy in zones 5-8. Due to their small stature and mid to late summer

bloom time, plants are best located along the edge of beds near walls or walkways where they can best be appreciated.

Unlike February and March, when the blooms of smaller statured bulbs are easily seen amongst the winter bare landscape, July to September is a time when these smaller blooms can be easily overlooked in nurseries or sales catalogues. Of course, it took a gentleman like Frank Cabot, the founder of the Garden Conservancy to appreciate the value this bulb brings to a garden. Its

beauty and unexpected appearance during mid-summer is a detail gardens both need and require. All the more reason why for the Garden, 'The Beauty is in the Details', is a far more appropriate phrase!



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