



The Wait is Over

Has there ever been an April so eagerly awaited? It's now a year since I first mentioned COVID-19 in these pages. Back then, none of us knew how long we'd be living in its shadow, and that's probably a good thing. We've survived a year of uncertainty and isolation, punctuated by fear and loss. For so many of us, our connection to the natural world has provided the only, the most essential solace for our battered hearts. Last summer, we walked our dogs at the Meadows, and harvested whatever vegetables the deer didn't eat first. Last fall, we gloried in the vibrant foliage down at the Cove. While millions were cooped up in city apartments, how lucky we were to live here! Even through the winter we could find joy in the patterns of lacy bare branches, or that particular diamond sparkle of starlight that only appears on the coldest, clearest winter nights. But we've never waited so impatiently for spring.

And finally the signs are here. My pond was quiet in the frozen months, and even quieter during last summer's drought, but now the stream from which it was carved is teeming, and the water rushes into the overflow pipe and continues downstream to join the river. The peepers' chorus begins with evensong and lasts through the newly mild nights. Strange: I go mad at the roar of leaf blowers (which don't belong in any civilized community), yet rejoice in the peepers' din echoing around my yard. Every year I play a game with myself, trying to identify the exact moment the trees leaf out, but it's a game I never win. The branches are bare and barren, and then the tiny nibs swell, and then one day I realize the whole hillside flushed with green when I wasn't looking.

Just this morning I saw a pair of ducks. This is a familiar ritual: They show up every year in early spring and spend about two weeks paddling around, occasionally venturing out onto the bank. Every year I start to hope I'll get to watch them raise their ducklings. I put seed near the edge to encourage them, but every year the faithless wretches eat the seed but break my heart and choose another neighborhood. Just as well, really; all the other pond creatures are roused from their winter's sleep, too, and that includes the snapping turtles, nemesis of duck parents everywhere.

We're been inside so long that even the worst spring garden chores are welcomed, as long as we get to be outdoors. Someone, decades ago, planted forsythia in my front yard, and it spread into a thicket twenty feet around, strangled by miles of bittersweet vines. It's so overgrown that it hardly blooms, and so oversized that it completely

obscures a stone retaining wall. Ever since I moved in I've been promising myself to get to it 'one of these days,' and on the first warm Sunday I hacked away with loppers and pruners. After an hour and a half I had built up a really quite impressive pile of branches, but the thicket still looks barely touched. 'One of these days' looks like it will become 'one of these summers.' If you ask me (nobody ever does, but I can hope) an aggressive shrub that's nondescript fifty weeks of the year is too high a price to pay for a few weeks' worth of cheerful flowers, no matter how starved we are for spring color. I won't pull it all out, but I'd never choose to plant it. If you do, promise yourself that you'll stay ahead of pruning.

One spring chore I am looking forward to is the continuing transformation of lawn into meadow. I bought packets of native grass seeds at the Wild Ones sale in March, (<https://wildones.org>), and hope to have respectable stands of bottlebrush grass, northern dropseed, and Indian grass by the end of the year. It's a happy coincidence of the importance of restoring native habitats and my desire to avoid maneuvering the Big Orange Machine on sloping lawn. You just don't realize how steep a hillside really is until you try to drive a riding mower across it. These grasses, once established, won't need much food or water, and no mowing at all. They form clumps that range from three to six feet tall, which should add a lot of interest in the winter, when the 'regular' grass is dormant. If I succeed, I'll be sharing seeds, plant divisions, and bragging rights in years to come.

It's finally spring. Put down this paper and go outside.