

Done in a Jiffy



This won't take long. Of course not!

By Janet Barr



It all started with Iris. For some years now, I'd notice her each May—just one fan of leaves and two or three stalks of flowers, poking up amid the roadside weeds at the edge of a field near my home. Some people pamper and fuss with their iris, trying with limited success to keep them happy. Yet this plucky little plant would smile at me each year during her short bloom season, just as she was about to be engulfed in the usual crowd of thistles, chicory, dandelions, and other ruffians.

Each year, I'd think I should rescue poor Iris. By the middle of June, those sword-like leaves would always be hidden in the weeds. Then at least once each summer someone would mow everything down and Iris would be reduced to stubble with the rest of the crowd.



This year, I finally decide to do it. The day after her last ruffled blossom shrivels, I am there with a trowel to save her from oblivion. It's not really stealing, I tell myself: It's a mission of mercy. There are no houses along that stretch of road and never have been. I can't imagine why she's been slumming it for so long.

Murmuring words of encouragement, I dig this shallow-rooted survivor up and carry her to her new home.

Now where to plant her? I choose a spot at the end of a flowerbed, where she'll have room to stretch out and enjoy life. But I have to remove a bit of grass sod to enlarge the bed. This shouldn't take too long: I'll be done in a jiffy. The piece of sod I take out is about 18 inches square, and I set it aside in the shade. Then I amend the soil and get it ready for Iris to wiggle her toes in. Once planted, she looks a bit pale and skeptical. She's not used to this luxury, I can tell.

Healthy grass shouldn't be wasted. Where shall I use the sod? Well, there's that sloping spot at the edge of the yard where the grass is dead. Actually, grass never seems to grow well there. It's usually mostly weeds mowed to an even height. Let's put it there.

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I strip that weedy covering off the top. What's this? Beneath the shallow layer of struggling weed roots is a pale gray substance. Ashes! I fetch a few buckets. I dig some more. In an hour I've gone down about a foot, excavating a larger area than I had intended. It's like Pompeii! There must be years' worth of ashes from a coal furnace—hailed here on bitter winter nights long ago—that I am now removing beneath a blazing sun, dripping sweat into the pit.



Now it's the next day. I am back at the excavation, filling more tubs and buckets with gray powdery ashes, until I finally hit real dirt, the brown, stony stuff I'm used to. The hole is more than a foot deep and about the size of a shallow grave. I decide that's big enough. I haven't reached the end of the ash pit, just my perseverance.

I decide this will become a flower bed. I scrounge around for rocks (not a problem—rocks we have in abundance here in Pennsylvania, they are one of my main crops) to line the back edge of the hole, to keep the dirt upslope from falling in. I throw in some dirt from an unfinished project in the back corner of the yard and good earth from two big unused flowerpots. I add quite a bit of compost and get the hole reasonably filled up.

I gather plants. There's always something that needs dividing or moving. I plant. I water. I accidentally dig up some bulbs, so I find homes for them, too.



And now it's the next next day. I dump the ashes in pot-holes in the alley and put the buckets and tubs away. I water Iris and the new bed again. I add a few more rocks.

As I brush the dirt off my knees and wearily head for the house, I see that hunk of sod still sitting in the shade by the porch. Oh. I may as well find a place to dig that in. I'll be done in a jiffy. ❖

