

VILLAGE VIEW

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There's no spring on Cape Cod. We all know that. March comes and goes, and the weather doesn't improve enough to notice. The vernal equinox may bring greenery to mainland fields and woodlands, but the icy waters that surround the Cape hold their bitter cold well into the month of May despite longer days and warming rays of the sun. And, when the waters finally warm up a little, and the air's not a blast from the Arctic Circle, there's a burst of blossom that's too soon gone as the hot days of June sweep summer into our lives.

No, there's just no spring on Cape Cod. But there are signs of spring. Without these, we would surely lose faith. The raw chill winds don't stop the crocus from pushing its way through the surface of the frosty ground, nor do dustings of snow stop its blossoming. The crocus stands up sturdily, short as its stalk may be, and bears proudly the bright yellows and lavenders, the whites and deep purples, the colors of spring. We may still shiver upon stepping outside, but the little bulbs do their assignments and not even the worst of winter retards their schedules.

How do they do it? Under the darkness of earth, they can't possibly respond to the light of lengthening days. It can't be the warming ground alone because some February days are as warm, if not warmer, than some March ones, yet there's no sign of crocus in February. Perhaps it's simply time-- yet crocus, like other bulbs, can be forced to early bloom in pots. Maybe the ground is warming long before we're aware.

Speaking of crocus, why do they move? A row of them, planted at the edge of a pebbled walk, invades the footpath. Rather than staying neatly to their places, nestled in the grass and safely out of the way, they strike out into the travel-lane where they're certain to be trod upon.

Pussy willow is another sign of spring. Look up at those slender branches; only a week ago they were bare and stiff. Overnight, it seems, the twigs are bare no longer; instead they're full and fat with kitten-soft pussies, gray velvet buds nosing from cinnamon sheathes.

The lilac's buds swell unexpectedly while it's much too cold and too early for any fragrant blooms. It will be weeks before they're ready to gather for Memorial Day. Yet they prepare themselves now, even while a skim of ice forms on pond-surfaces night after night.

Forsythia will blaze in every dooryard this week or next. A few snipped sprays would have brightened your room if you'd cut them anytime during the last six weeks and given them a quick warm-water dip before arranging them in a tall

blue pitcher of water.

Jonquils, daffodils, narcissus and hyacinths will assure spring is here while you still wrap your throat in a woolly scarf and wear gloves on your hands.

The early azaleas, the lavender ones, will have come and gone by the time the bright globes of rhododendron splash their vibrant color wherever they grow. How tall they've grown! They add nearly a foot in height each year. The two-foot plants, set out among pines and oaks only a few years ago (can it possibly be fifteen?) now tower twice as high, and still reaching, as eye-level.

At the beach the wild pea sprouts and spreads its tendrils. Sifting through the sand for miniature shells brought high above the shingle by the swirling March tides, and as yet uncrushed by running feet of sun and water bathers, the perfect specimens are found. The littlest ones are the object of search, this late-March day; shells to grace quarter-inch shelves mounted on a dollhouse wall.

Wind tears at flapping trouser-legs, makes eyes water and noses run; but the sun beats on the bundling coat pulled tight and buttoned high. Its warmth penetrates to the skin even while the wind snatches away body-heat in hungry gulps.

Home again and sorting the shells according to size, we find among the clinging grains of sand, and hardly discernible without a magnifying glass, tiny drills, shaped like cornucopia, perfect in every minute detail. Who would ever dream these fragile teeny treasures might withstand the crashing of the waves breaking on the winter beach, the grinding of perpetually shifting sands, the daily washings of tides? By mid-summer most will have been crushed, ground to powder, billions of them adding their dust to the far-flung stretches of beach. Now, though, in their perfection they're a spring-sign.

April will weep and blow and sigh. Mayflowers will unfurl hairy little leaves like mouse ears under the detrius of winter-molding mulch and lift pink-and-white sweet-smelling stars to the sun. Ferns and skunk cabbage will turn the dark and sombre swamps and wetlands into a miracle of greenery. Moss at the foot of twisted whiteoak will change, chameleon-like, from pale no-color to brilliant emerald.

One evening the night will echo-with the voices of peepers singing their courting songs, a million tiny treetoads shrilling in the twilight their eternal joy.

Early mornings will grow noisier as the birds return and take up their nest-sites, establish their territories, seek and find mates, and set about their home-building tasks with all the attendant gathering of grasses, twigs, strands of thread, scraps of litter all-but-rotted and all-but-hidden beneath old leaves. Robins will hop and bob, stop stock-still in a listening attitude, drive their sharp beaks deep into the lawn, and then fly off, a dangling earthworm wriggling in mid-air.

Towhees will scratch and jump backwards, turning over every sere brown leaf, yes, every single one, leaving none unturned no matter how many floated to the ground last November. Are the towhees never discouraged? No, never. They boast, "Look at meee, look at meee!" as they rummage for choice morsels in the underbrush.

No, there's no spring on Cape Cod. Not if you think spring must be a season of warm balmy days and mild pleasant nights, there's no spring at all. Cape weather goes straight from winter to summer with hardly a day's warning.

Signs of spring began, weeks ago, and now are tumbling over themselves all around us. They are everywhere in the smells, sounds and sights and, above all, in the actions of every living thing our world encompasses.

Maybe it still feels like winter, but nobody who sniffs the wind, listens to the soft background symphony of sound, looks for signs that are repeated year after year in this season, can fail to find them here once more.

Do stay bundled up. Huddle close to the woodstove's heat. Keep your earflappers down and wear your galoshes. But don't miss Cape Cod's spring. Perhaps it doesn't walk up and slap you between the shoulders with heavy enthusiasm. Perhaps its subtle presence is easy to miss. Perhaps because it's not as obtrusive as our other three seasons, we put a high value on our sort of spring, go out looking for it, and reap a rich reward in our search.