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Weeding
and mulch
more**

For the avid gardener

Iris for March

Dull, damp days of March - the time of year when every gardener is looking for some sign of spring. But if you had thought ahead last fall, you would not have to settle for a minute reminder because your bulbous iris would be heralding the season in all its glory. These early harbingers may not have the three-foot stature of their later-blooming relatives, but they bravely battle through snow and ice to be the first of their kind to greet the sun.

Two species of early bulbous iris are usually grown. The most

common is *Iris reticulata*, a hardy bulb with dark purple blooms on six-inch stems. It gets its species name "reticulata" from the netted cover surrounding each inch-long bulb. Although the flowers have yellow markings, their dark color makes them difficult to spot. Other cultivars such as 'Cantab,' a light blue form, and 'Harmony,' a medium to dark blue, are showier against dark soil or mulch.

The leaves are very thin and wirey, and although they may become quite long after the flowers die back, the foliage is

narrow enough to be unobtrusive and should not be cut back. *Iris reticulata* is hardy and will come up year after year in a well-drained, south-facing location.

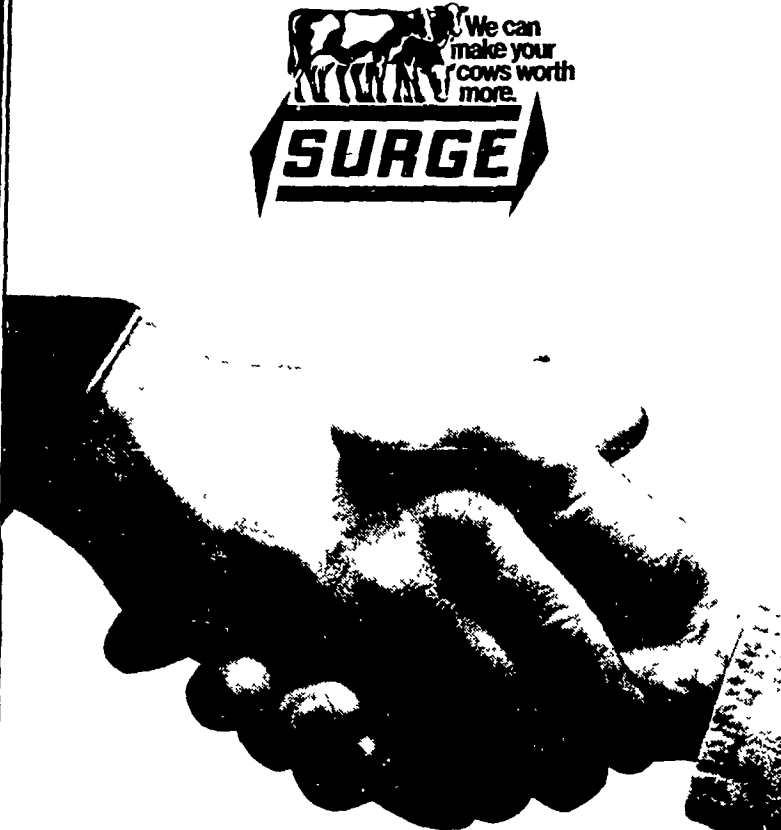
Iris danfordiae has petite, yellow blossoms that seem to radiate the sun's warmth. It is even earlier than *Iris reticulata*, often blooming in mid-March. The bulbs flower nicely the first year and then divide into tiny bulbets. These are often too small to bloom again for several years. Replanting each fall is the best way to ensure flowers every spring.

Bulbs for both species are readily available in garden centers and catalogs. Find a sunny, well-drained location close to the house or a walkway where the blooms can be enjoyed in spite of the weather. The bulbs do best planted at a depth of four inches. Fall planting is preferred. Mulching is recommended in very cold climates or exposed areas. It's not necessary to dig the bulbs up from year to year.

For a very small investment of time and money, you could have your own spring harbingers of sunshine and blue sky. Wouldn't it be worth the effort?



Tiny iris proves that spring is just around the corner.



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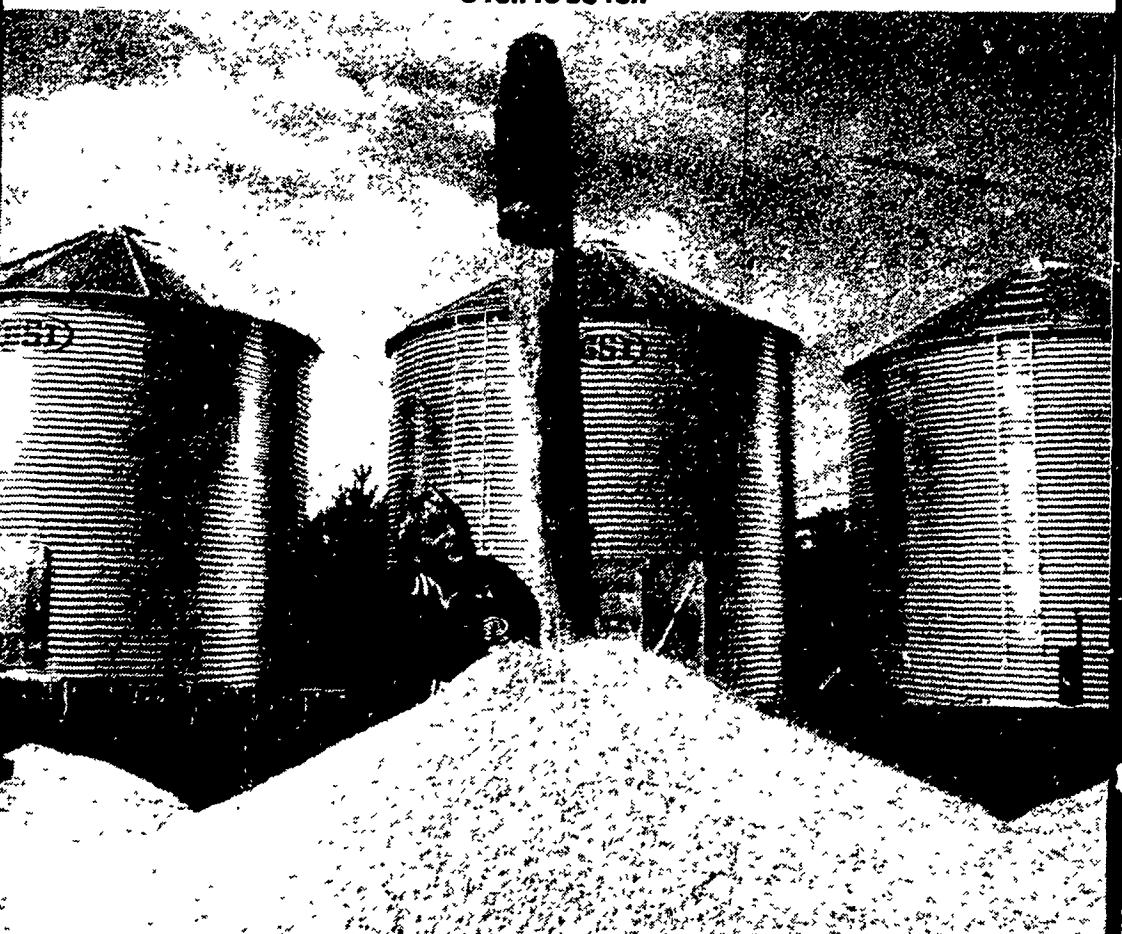
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