

Full of Joy: Seasons of Beauty in the Meadow

by Kay Faye Fialkoff

Some experiences have been truly captivating and even rapturous.

Looking for elements for a composition is like looking for love. At first the captivating ones are of interest. With some, it's even a passionate experience. Yet, after frequent exposure, the more unassuming become the cherished ones.

So it has been for me with my walks through the seasons at the Allendale Celery Farm, a nature preserve in Allendale, New Jersey. I started visiting the farm in late winter more than sixteen years ago. Some experiences have been truly captivating and even rapturous. One day I was startled to see a male American goldfinch ravenously eating evening primrose petals. For me, it was a rare observation. On another occasion, on a late summer afternoon, strong sunlight backlit a tall planting of joe-pye weed, creating spectacular bursts of hot-pink and red color, an image seared into my memory. During another summer walk along a trail that ambles east of the joe-pye weed, dense stands of giant phragmites, perhaps ten feet tall, dwarfed me as I strained to see their wispy clusters of purple flowers swaying across the sky.

During many fall walks along the trail that leads south of the joe-pye weed and its neighboring butterfly garden, my whole field of vision is filled with dense plantings of cattail with globs of fluff ready for plucking.

An unexpected sighting of an American coot made one visit to the preserve more than worthwhile. On another occasion a breathless moment awaited me when I discovered a mute swan calmly sitting in the shallows of the glacial lake's shore, just a few feet away from me!



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However, the most awesome experience came during an early morning outing when a northern harrier flew low over the water and straight towards me while I was sitting on an observation deck.

Yet, on most of my visits, not much happens. The preserve is a calm, quiet, still place. Turtles sunbathe on rocks in the shallows of the glacial lake, their shells gleaming like semi-precious stones. Water snakes glide through the adjacent creek and canals. Red-winged blackbirds perch on tall reeds, announcing themselves with their distinct voice. The egrets and herons stand stock still, poised to spear a fish. They're there season after season, and one can notice them or not.

In searching for the elements for this meadowlands composition, I noticed plantings that are just there—the ones that don't demand fervent attention as I walk the long foot trail around the lake. My eye is always drawn to the spotted touch-me-not that grows gracefully along a wooden fence in partial shade. Though it can reach upwards of three feet along the fencing, its delicate presence invites a state of calm which helps ground me in the natural setting. A member of the jewelweed family, the trumpet-shaped, three-petaled flowers bloom from June through September.

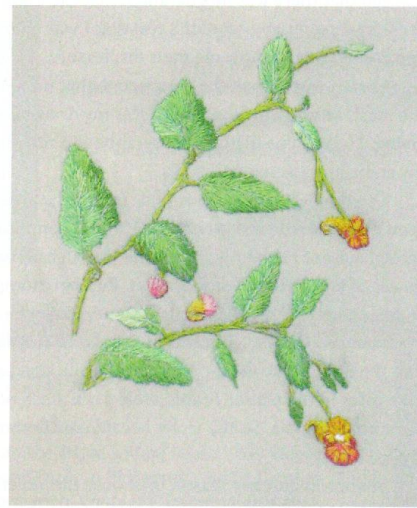
At first, the trumpet-shaped flower's red orange spots and curled-back spur attracted my attention. However, what made it most endearing to me was what I saw when I peered directly into the face of the small flower. The petal arrangement appeared like a delicate orchid, even though it is not an orchid. It reminded me of a blissful experience I had gazing at a marvelous orchid collection in the Fern and Orchid House in Duke Gardens in Hillsborough, New Jersey.

It was a total joy to spend time with my graph paper pad drawing these beloved beauties, hoping that the mosquitoes would find me an unpleasant hostess. As I drew, I sensed the plant's special qualities: its tender stems, the delicate leaves easily disturbed by a breeze, and the genuine loveliness and beauty of the flowers.

Although ironweed grows in moist meadows and along stream margins, it has found a comfortable spot in the preserve on a very narrow piece of land that lies between a canal and the glacial lake. It grows in the



A goldfinch flying towards ironweed



Touch-me-not



Violets

shade of some tall trees that thrive in the wet environment. In late summer to early fall it has strikingly beautiful deep violet flower heads that form a loose spray. As I walk past them on my way to the preserve's first observation deck, I pause and watch the spear-shaped leaves sway in the gentleness of breezes.

Realizing that its growth pattern makes a great counterbalance to the spotted touch-me-not, I found some time on a late summer afternoon to draw the plant. There was not much room to accommodate my long legs and spread out with my large drawing pad so I could make a life-size drawing. Even as I settled into drawing, I realized that there was no guarantee that the Canada geese, resting nearby, wouldn't feel that I was an intruder and consequently, show me their displeasure.

Having established the perspective that interested me the most, I drew with abandon. After my drawing session ended, I took some digital photographs as a reference for my embroidery sessions.

To complete the composition, I needed a plant that grew quite close to the ground that would communicate subtly, but not too subtly, love. That was an easy one. A flower of love in Russia is the violet. Russian immigrant women have told me that my last name, *Fialkoff* (pronounced *fee-AAL-ka*), means "violet" in Russian and that the orchid-like flower grows in the Siberian tundra. Like roses in the United States, violets are the flower of romance in Russia. So the violet became my flower of choice.

There was another reason to choose the violet. I felt that I should do a self-portrait, as it were, for this suite. If Rembrandt could do it, placing himself among his subjects, so could I! So when it came to drawing the violets' spring blooms, there was a special joy in my heart.

Since the entire *Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suite, Nos. 1-4* is based on the concept of the joyful aspect of prayer, I wanted to develop a pose for the American goldfinch that would communicate that idea. For inspiration, I browsed through *Hiroshige: Birds and Flowers*. Hiroshige's bird portrayals are animated, playful, and joyful. His composition, *A Little Bird Amidst Chrysanthemum*, is a beautiful statement in verticality as the botanicals repeat and harmonize with the shape of the bird. All the elements in the composition create a smooth flow through the space.

After much thought, I decided that, with realism as a critical consideration, I'd have to go with a bird in flight. The American goldfinch's pose in this suite carries the composition's elements in a smooth flow, moving the eye

from the spotted touch-me-not to the ironweed with great ease. The eye also moves upward from the American goldfinch's wings to the Hebrew letters' golden threads declaring, in translation, "Full of Joy," to the rest of the plants' elements in both the spotted touch-me-not and the ironweed. The eye is led to explore the violets in their graceful poses. All the elements have a gentle grace, in my mind, like the dance of the three Graces in Botticelli's great painting, *La Primavera*.

With this composition, I tried to portray the sense of serenity that the meadow can offer and make a joyful prayer celebrating the feeling that comes with being connected to the earth. Since I have come to that point in my life where serenity and deep connection are in the very fibers of my being, I offer up to you the seasons of beauty in the meadow as a reflection of myself and an offering to anyone who wishes to share in the joy. ■

Kay Faye Fialkoff lives in Fair Lawn, New Jersey. She is a member of EGA's Bergen Chapter. Her Prayers for the Earth: Wetlands Suites, Nos. 1-4, and Prayers for the Earth: Meadowlands Suites, Nos. 1-3, have been previously published in Needle Arts since 1996. Currently, she is working on Prayers for the Earth: Woodlands Suite, No. 1. For more information, visit her website: www.findingkaty.com.

PRAYERS FOR THE EARTH: MEADOWLANDS SUITE, NO. 4

15-inch diameter design on silk fabric. Threads used: Robison Anton rayon threads. Color mixing was accomplished by laying different colored threads side-by-side and by layering the stitches.

Without the continued use of an American goldfinch specimen from the Princeton Biology Laboratory, Fialkoff would not have been able to embroider the American goldfinch so realistically.

In creating this composition, Fialkoff followed a concept in the art of Zen, portraying nature over time and space.