

Walking the primrose path

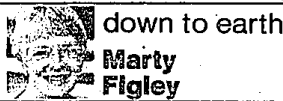
Lead you down a primrose path — me? You bet, when it can be as pretty as the one in Vivian Kalmbach's garden. She lives in Bloomfield Hills and has been growing primrose plants ever since a friend, Betty Frost, gave her some books on the subject about seven years ago. She looked at the pictures and in her words she was "hooked."

A walk down her primrose path is a delightful experience. There are colors such as cream, yellow, gold, soft pink, rose, blue, violet and many shades in between to enjoy. I mention specific colors seen on our stroll, but all primroses bloom in

many shades. Some have striped or gold-edged petals, even stars in the center and double blooms.

The first primroses I saw were Siebaldii, the earliest to grow because they go completely dormant. These have a pale yellow trumpet-like flower and originated in Japan. Then there are the tiny Vernal, Juliae (2-3 inches tall) with bright yellow blooms. Kalmbach started with this variety. These separate beautifully by taking one or two small plants off from the outer section without disturbing the plant.

Next there was an area of Barnhaven Blues, a Barnhaven



down to earth
Marty Fligley

primrose, so named by Florence Bella, who created the hardy primrose. She christened her primroses Barnhaven because it all started in an old barn in Oregon. These are the earliest to bloom in shades of wonderful violet and light blue. The seeds of this group come from England, so germination rate may not be very successful.

hand pollinates with a little brush using two different plants.

The pollen is taken from one plant and put on the plant that is to set seed. Cheese cloth is gently put over the flowers to keep bees from disturbing them and the ants from stealing the seeds. Seeds are so tiny, they look like powder. When they are harvested, they are put into an envelope for safe-keeping and set aside to dry for a couple of months. Fresh seeds are necessary for successful germination. That's why the ones from England may not work.

Soon I spotted a group of Veneris, an orange shade, with a contrasting five-pointed star in the center. Among these were younger plants, which showed the rate of growth. It takes three years for almost all primroses started from seed to bloom. Patience is the key.

Kalmbach starts seeds in September because of the time it takes to realize a plant. Everything must be sterile. Soil is sterilized (she does her own by baking it at 200 degrees for 2-3 hours) and put in a clean square plastic four inch pot which has been rinsed in bleach.

Denticulata, which grows up to 12 inches high and Cowdchan are her favorites. Candalabras, also seen, can grow to three feet.

Dorothy is the name of another very special primrose in this garden. It has a long calyx. The light yellow flower is trumpet shaped, similar to the Siebaldii.

At this stage the loose, cooled soil is dry, seeds are sprinkled on top and the pot set in water so that soil can be wet from below. This also pulls the seeds down into the soil. The pots are misted for three days with water at 110 degrees and then two days with 110 degree water. The hot water takes the place of freezing the seeds, as is often recommended, and helps break the hard shell.

Primroses hardly ever set seed because of the shape of the flowers. Bees can't reach into the blossoms far enough to pollinate. If Kalmbach wants the flowers to set seed, she



JERRY ZOLYNSKY/start photographer

Vivian Kalmbach cups a favorite primrose in her hand. She has been growing many varieties for about seven years.

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