The Invasive

**Iris pseudacorus** (yellow flag iris)

The bright yellow blooms of the yellow flag iris are a common sight along stream sides, pond edges and other low-lying wetlands throughout Ohio and other parts of the world. In fact, yellow flag iris has invaded most of the continental United States with exception of some Great Plains and Rocky Mountain states. A native of Europe, northern Africa and the Mediterranean, it was initially introduced to North America as an ornamental plant for water gardens. The iris also proved to be a useful part of sewage treatment due to its ability to remove sediment and heavy metals from wastewater. Though it thrives in moist soils and shallow standing water, yellow flag iris can survive droughts lasting up to three months. Its secret to success lies in its two methods of reproduction. Each flower spike produces chubby seedpods containing rows of buoyant, hockey puck shaped seeds. The iris also sprouts from its spreading rhizomes, which allows the plant to form dense clumps that push out into nearby wetlands. During flood events, floating seeds and broken rhizomes can often escape to new areas.

The Alternatives

**Iris versicolor** (northern blue flag iris)

An elegant alternative to the loud yellow flag iris, northern blue flag is native to freshwater wetlands in the northeastern portion of North America, with a hardness rating up to Zone 2. Its finely streaked flowers can vary in shades of blue-violet and open in succession on 2-3 foot flower spikes from May to June. Long strap-like foliage remains attractive throughout the growing season. Plant it along pond and stream edges or in submerged containers with rhizomes at or just below the soil surface. Blue flag enjoys the same moist to wet soils as yellow flag iris. It can also be grown in garden beds with constant moisture in full sun or partial shade. It will spread via its rhizome and will form dense clumps. Containerized plants should be divided every two to three years, but wear gloves because the plant sap can irritate skin. Cut back foliage after a fall frost to avoid pest and disease problems. Another iris that is similar to northern blue flag is Sreeve's iris (**Iris virginica** var. sreevei), a variety of southern blue flag that can also be grown in Ohio.

**Iris fulva** 'Red Rocket' (copper iris)

The uniquely colored copper iris is also native to North America. From the lower Mississippi Valley to the Deep South, its salmon to rust-colored flowers bloom from May to June and are sometimes visited by hummingbirds. This iris does well when planted in wet, clay soils in full sun. It can handle some shade and up to 6 inches of standing water. Because copper iris is a plant of the South, it requires some winter protection in Ohio's climate. After cutting back the foliage in late fall, cover the bare roots with a light layer of compost, straw or leaves. Remove the cover in the spring, being careful to avoid damaging the emerging foliage. This is a good practice for growing most types of irises in a cold climate. "Lois Yellow" is a yellow flowered variety of the species that may serve as a great alternative to yellow flag iris.

**Iris sibirica** 'Butter and Sugar' (Siberian iris)

Though the flowers of the species are usually purple in color, 'Butter and Sugar' is a wonderful pale yellow cultivar of Siberian iris. Native to northern Asia, Siberian irises are hardy to Zone 3 and tend to be fairly easy to grow. 'Butter and Sugar's delicate flowers are composed of three soft yellow outer petals, called falls and three white inner petals, called standards. Siberian irises are best grown in very moist, fertile, slightly acidic soils, but they will tolerate poorer and drier sites. Its ornamental and low-maintenance qualities has earned 'Butter and Sugar' an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society. It is also less susceptible to iris borer than other irises.

Iris versicolor. Fine veins on the petals of the blue flag iris serve as nectar guides for pollinators. *W. Kimble, commons*