

Self-portrait (June 13, 2016)

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE

I LOVE JACK-IN-THE-PULPIT. IT'S one of my favorites, and I'm guessing you've never heard anyone say that before. It's a funny color for a flower . . . mostly green and very deep red, almost brown. Also a curious shape—a kind of pouch with a flap very nearly enclosing a generously sized red or purple stalk—"Jack" being the stalk and the "pulpit" being the pouch and flap. Then, too, there is the fact that you have to be on your hands and knees to see one of these things, as they grow six to twelve inches off the ground, nearly hidden by the plants two large leaves. But I truly love it and eagerly await its arrival every spring.

My home in midcoast Maine (south of Downeast and north of Portland) sits on a five-acre lot in the woods—tall white pines, hemlock, spruce, some oak, sugar maple, red maple, poplar, beech, a few birch, and a couple of crabapple trees that birds must have planted some years ago. Also lots of ferns, violets, bluets, paintbrush, raspberries, blackberries, and goldenrod. The first wildflowers to bloom in the spring are anemone, trout lily, violets, bluets, and trillium. And by the end of May, Jack-in-the-Pulpit is ready for its very subtle show.

I've been in my house for close to twenty-five years, and I've spent thousands of hours in my woods—walking, snow-shoeing,

picking flowers, studying plant life, clearing unwanted brush, sawing dead limbs, picking up sticks, watching baby birds and their mothers in their nests, and on and on. For a very long time the only Jack-in-the-Pulpit I was aware of was a grouping of five or six plants that came up every year just in front of a birch tree about thirty feet from my sunroom. I looked for them every spring and throughout the summer would make a point to stop to look at them, always trying to keep my dogs from stomping on them while I bent down to enjoy them. Several years ago I found a few other small and immature groupings and had the idea to try to replant them in my various gardens around the house, around the garage, along both sides of the long driveway, and in front of the wooden fence that outlines one side of the front lawn. Some wild plants do not transplant well: Lady Slipper is one good example; best to leave them wherever you find them. But that's never been a problem with Jack-in-the-Pulpit. So for the last several years I've been spreading these unique plants all over the property. This year I've been rewarded as I'm seeing Jack-in-the-Pulpit everywhere!

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. She has called Maine her home for the last thirty years.



image info

A couple days ago I paused to wonder why I like these plants so much; most people don't even know they exist. The answer came to me rather quickly: they're a lot like me. Jack-in-the-Pulpit are happiest in the shady part of the woods where sun is sparse and the ground is cool. They are shy and unassuming and easily missed by those who walk by. They aren't colorful, but they are unique. And, to get to know them, you have to put forth some effort. Well . . . me too. I'm happiest in the woods where I can enjoy glorious tall trees towering above me, the cool and moist forest floor that supports ferns and wildflowers and mushrooms, the sound of the wind in the leaves, and the smell of pine and spruce after a rain. I too am shy and reserved and easily missed. I'm not loud or brash or flamboyant, but I like to think that I'm one-of-a-kind. I'm careful about who I allow in to get to know me, and I open up slowly but generously. I'd be very happy to be perched on the forest floor, lovingly protected by a couple of large leaves. So now, dear Jack-in-the-Pulpit, I understand. I'm just like you. ❖

