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From My Garden by H.E. Bates



All Seeds Bright and Beautiful

This month our favourite novelist—seen here with his wife—suggests how we can economise in the garden by growing the choicer trees and shrubs from seed

It is contended that if we were entirely to evacuate the English landscape it would return to natural forest within 25 years. All this would be achieved by seeds, entirely without the aid of man.

This thought inspires me to say that if I were a young man starting a garden all over again I should have no hesitation in growing not only a great many plants from seeds but also a considerable number of trees and shrubs. There are several reasons for this. First, of course, cost: the formidable expense of nursery stock, more especially trees and shrubs, is becoming positively frightening, even if one saves carriage costs, which heaven knows are frightening enough in themselves, by collecting things from plant centres. Second, raising a shrub or tree from seed is a great challenge and great fun, leading to an immense sense of satisfaction as the species mature. Third, the task is by no means a difficult one and it is also surprising how soon very many trees and shrubs reach maturity, whether they are grown for blossom or not.

I am fortified in this resolve by the fact that I hardly ever tour my garden without spotting some new self-sown seedling of a tree or shrub, of which the varieties are considerable: cotoneasters, hypericums, brooms, hollies, conifers, kerrias, clematis, even roses. Some of these, which appeared only two or three years ago, are now maturing into sizeable specimens. One, a seedling cupressus, is eight feet high; other varieties of cupressus, originally raised from seed gathered by a friend in Yugoslavia, have now reached an even greater height, closely followed by a *Cupressus macrocarpa* which, only a couple of summers ago, was no bigger than a child's paint brush. Even this rate of growth is exceeded by the cotoneasters, which are, if anything, rather too rampant.

Naturally one doesn't want a surfeit of the commoner

things. Where, then, does one get seed of choicer subjects? One answer is Thompson and Morgan, of Ipswich, whose fat seed catalogue lists some 5,000 items. Here there are no fewer than 12 pages of shrub and tree seed, many of them uncommon, some rare. There are no fewer than 15 species of maple, the same of berberis, 26 of cotoneaster, 14 of cupressus, 22 of eucalyptus, 16 of magnolia and no less than 46 of rhododendron, many of them rare, ranging in size from 1½ feet to 30 feet. Add to these a couple of dozen hybrids and species of rose, a dozen of erica, and a dozen and a half of brooms and another dozen and a half of pines and you begin to get some idea of the vast choice which is open to the gardener of adventure and, of course, patience.

Naturally you can't get everything. There are, for instance, no eucryphias, one of which, *E. glutinosa*, I extolled a month or two ago as perhaps the choicest shrub of the year. Nor can I find a shrub which is perhaps even more exquisite: the ravishing *Michelia Doltsopa*, which is related to the magnolias. This heavenly beauty, which comes from Japan, bears in spring huge floppy blossoms of purest white which give off the most celestial perfume. I must confess I have never seen it growing in this country, though I believe it does do so, but only in Madeira, where its glorious January-February display takes the breath away.

Nevertheless there are many things almost as choice. Seed is available, for instance, of *Vitis coignetiae*, the huge-leaved vine whose praises I have so often sung. Also here are *Fremontia californica* and *Carpenteria californica*, the one with generous yellow poppy-like flowers, the other with white. So, to my surprise, is *Hibiscus mutabilis*, whose flowers, that change from pale pink to deep red as the day goes on, I also described some time ago. A relative of the citrus family, *Poncirus trifoliata*, a shrub with stout spines and bearing miniature yellow oranges, is available. This shrub, though its little oranges are not much good to eat, makes a dense and forbidding hedge. So too does *Elaeagnus angustifolia*, a great favourite of mine with its shiny silver leaves, delicate silver-yellow flowers and golden-orange fruits much loved by blackbirds. My specimen gets madly raided every week or two by my flower-arranging friends, and deservedly so.

As to other fruits, I note both persimmon and pomegranate, the latter of which, with its reddish-orange fuchsia-like flowers, I find enchanting. It is perfectly easy from seed and will make an endearing pot-plant. Another silver-leaved shrub also bearing scarlet fruits in the autumn and related to the elaeagnus tribe is *Shepherdia argentea*, sometimes called the Buffalo Berry. Still another orange-fruited shrub, this time from China, is *Stransvaesia davidiana*, and still another, *Sarcococca ruscifolia*. The charming pittosporums, also much-loved by flower arrangers, sit side by side with four varieties of pieris, all peat-lovers, one with fiery red, almost poinsettia-like leaves when young, all with lily-of-the-valley-like flowers.

Scope for adventure indeed. And if you are a bonsai fan, there is scope for skill, too. As to culture, don't forget our old friend 'stratification'. This simply means sowing shrub and tree seed outside in winter, leaving it exposed to hard frosts in order to break dormancy. This is also the way to germinate peach and apricot stones. My two sons, when boys, grew scores of peach-trees from stones, eventually fruiting them quite successfully.

Finally, if you like maple syrup, *Acer saccharum* will give you just that, with a glorious bonus of orange and crimson autumn foliage thrown in.