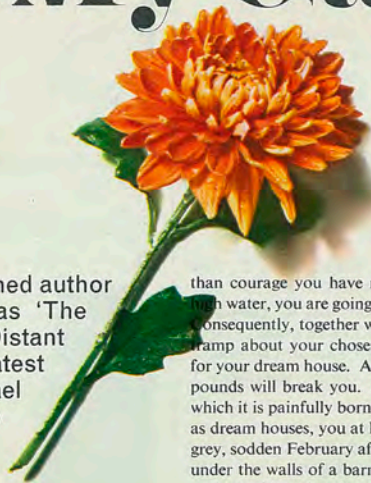


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# From My Garden

by H. E. BATES



H. E. Bates is the distinguished author of such delightful books as 'The Jacaranda Tree' and 'The Distant Horns of Summer' (his latest book, published by Michael Joseph). Perhaps not so well known is his love of gardening—and we are delighted to introduce him to you as our gardening writer. He will bring his individual approach to this popular topic, month by month

Imagine yourself, if you can, back in the year 1931. It is the time of the Great Depression. There are, or have only recently been, three and a half million unemployed. For a brief period you were one of them. Even now you haven't a job in the strictest sense of the word. You have no regular income. You are in fact a very junior member of the world's most uncertain profession—that of the writer.

Imbued with a single-mindedness that is nearer to sheer folly

than courage you have nevertheless decided that, come hell or high water, you are going to find yourself a cottage in the country. Consequently, together with the girl you are going to marry, you tramp about your chosen territory, Kent and Sussex, searching for your dream house. Anything costing more than four hundred pounds will break you. After months of fruitless wandering, in which it is painfully borne upon you that there are no such things as dream houses, you at last find yourself standing, on a dreary, grey, sodden February afternoon in a flooded Kentish farm-yard, under the walls of a barn.

From this point there is no longer need for you to use your imagination. Simply look at the top picture on the opposite page. This is that barn; a granary. Stone built, weather-boarded, roofed with russet tiles, it perhaps looks a pretty odd prospect for a house. Close to it stands an enormous pollarded willow tree. A little to the left of it is half a crazy-looking haystack propped up with beams. Beyond the haystack are two more willows, each having fallen flat on its face as if in despair at the general chaotic nature of the scene.

On that sodden February afternoon you squelch about the farm-yard. Up to your shoe-tops in mud you take, with a small box camera, the photograph I have just mentioned. Then you again stand by the barn wall. Suddenly, out of the dark February dreariness, the sun shines. It falls pale gold on the

beautifully squared and graduated stones of the barn. It lights up miraculously the yellow fans and fingers of lichen clinging about the stone. It feels just the faintest degree warm as you face due south. And suddenly, without a word, you know that this is it. Insuperable folly it may be, but this is the dream.

Now I would like you to take a look at the picture on the opposite page. It was taken this year, on a July morning of the calmest beauty, from roughly the same spot as the old picture. A rising summer forest of flowers now flourishes with great richness where formerly there was a veritable jungle of docks, nettles and thistles. Queenly delphiniums rise against foaming masses of purple, pink and mauve—the flowers of three fine salvia, a family about which I am slightly batty: namely *Salvia Turkistanica*, a pink one, *S. Candelabrum*, a purple branching one, and *S. Haematodes*, a Greek beauty, purest mauve, its florescence the densest of the three. Note them down. They are very desirable treasures.

This then is my garden, made from a farm-yard. During the course of making it I have committed a thousand blunders and have caught almost as many viruses and contracted almost as many diseases. I have suffered from alpinitis, chrysanthemum-itis, begoniatis, orchiditis, fuchsiasitis and heaven knows what other horticultural bugs. From some of these I have recovered; others I continue to contract, as some people contract hay fever, summer by summer. But over all I am a slightly better informed man, garden-wise, than when I stood under the walls of my house-to-be, on a sodden February afternoon, thirty-six years



ago. Some of the fruits of this long period of trial, error, sweat and infinite pleasure I now hope to pass on to you in this column.

Now a word in this introductory article as to what I shall *not* do. I shall *not* be instructing you as to the niceties of sowing mustard and cress on flannel or that it is time to thin your spring onions, take strawberry runners or pinch out the tops of your broad beans in order to prevent black fly. I shall *not* be informing you that it is now time to sow nasturtiums, night-scented stock or that dreadful order of marigolds, *tagetes*—always pronounced by jobbing gardeners (who for some reason adore them) to rhyme with sweets. I shall *not* be encouraging you to slaughter your rose trees on the sacred principal of 'pruning hard for exhibition' since the only exhibition I care about is the one I see from the window of my house. I shall *not* be urging you to grow leeks as large as lamposts or marrows as fat as sucking pigs in order that you can make a monkey out of your next door neighbour at the local flower show. I don't care much for flower shows.

What I shall be trying to do instead is to point the way to a sort of gardening that will give more pleasure for less work and in which over and over again it will be seen that it is very often just as easy, and no more expensive, to grow aristocrats as nonentities. Experiment is exciting and it has long been a gardening principal of mine to try something new every year. In this way I have discovered a host of uncommon and little known beauties which are no more trouble to grow than commoner things such as stocks and asters.

I am not a professional gardener; nor is gardening an exact science. If I were not perennially suspicious of that time-honoured cliché, green fingers, I might be tempted to say that I have green fingers. Instead, I prefer to believe that I have developed as a gardener in the same way as a friend of mine. In middle life, never having gardened before, she took it up with enormous enthusiasm and prodigious success. When I congratulated her on her skills and rewards she replied with devastating logic: 'Nonsense. I can read, can't I?' Exactly. You too can read.

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Mr Bates (pictured below with his daughter, Ann) regrets he cannot answer readers' queries. These should be sent to LIVING Gardening Bureau at address on page 1 with s.a.e.

