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'Thank you, Kitty' by H. E. Bates

Suddenly to achieve complete success with a plant that had previously only brought dismal failure is a marvellous source of satisfaction.

I grew a number of new plants in the beautiful summer of 1970 but none gave me greater pleasure than streptocarpus, those handsome relatives of gloxinias and achimenes. My pleasure from these delicious things, with their splendid trumpets ranging in colour from darkest purple through mauve and lavender and all shades of pink and red to white, often with lovely veinings, was two-fold. I loved them not only for themselves but because hitherto, for years, my score with them was 0 out of 100. This I attributed first to the fact that I could never give them warmth in winter (they are of course only for the greenhouse) and secondly to a certain impatience in my character which would never let the plants, slow in their early stages, have enough time for development.

Then one day my wife said 'Well, if Kitty can grow them surely you can.' Kitty is a busy farmer's wife who gets duly involved in the strawberry season, the blackcurrant season, the apple season, the pear season and the hop season and yet still finds time to run a large garden, and grow in her greenhouses, with sumptuous success, primulas, geraniums, pelargoniums and above all, streptocarpus. Her two greenhouses are not as large as mine nor any better heated yet she always seems to be one step ahead of me.

Thus challenged, I renewed my combat with streptocarpus. The first round of success was getting down to sowing the seed, which is very, very fine, in Levington compost; it germinated with quite ridiculous ease. The second round was won in a propagating frame heated electrically with a coil which used very little current but kept the temperature at about 60 deg F. In this way the plants made small but steady growth all winter.

Then, in spring, I picked up two further tips from our friend Kitty and soon Round Three was on the way to being won. The first tip was to use John Innes Compost No 4, which I didn't even know existed until enlightened by Kitty. The second was I noticed that Kitty tended to grow her greenhouse plants not singly in ordinary 5in or 6in pots, but in half dozens

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'From My Garden' for this month is our favourite novelist's thoughts on one of the greater fascinations of gardening—that there is always something new to be discovered. And gardeners are an extremely friendly crowd, most of them quite ready to share any discoveries with friends.



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in deep 10in seed pans. Not only did her plants flourish greatly in the pans, but, when massed together in the house, made a lovely display of rich magnificence.

Having a number of large seed pans standing empty I accordingly planted them up with streptocarpus. Result—Round Four was won, a miracle. The streptocarpus, massed together, grew like cabbages and flowered with ethereal splendour. I then made two main discoveries—first that, unlike, gloxinias, they were continually sending up new hordes of buds, and second that they made even better house plants than they did greenhouse plants. They

were especially lovely, particularly the deep raspberry and coppery-red shades, under electric light. A further excellent point about them is their long season of flowering. As I write, my streptocarpus have been flowering for five months and will, I imagine, oblige with at least two more.

Having thus learned several useful lessons from Kitty, I felt that I ought to give her some special plant in return. The plant I gave her was one which I may have mentioned before and which I first saw at a garden centre last September in Switzerland. When I saw its 2ft spikes of vivid violet, elegantly lobed flowers I deemed it to be a campanula. It wasn't, in fact, a campanula: nor, in fact, as it happened was my guess a bad one. The

plant was a lobelia, *Lobelia Vedrariensis*; the guess wasn't a bad one because campanula and lobelia are close cousins. This particular lobelia is, by the way, totally unlike the dwarf budding lobelia seen everywhere every summer. It is a highly elegant plant and worthy of a place beside any other aristocrat in the garden.

It has another great virtue: it comes easily from seed (Thompson and Morgan, Ipswich, list it in their excellent new catalogue); and still another: from a March sowing it will flower in August. So it has proved to be doubly valuable and has, moreover, made a very good present for Kitty. Thus do gardeners share their many treasures. Thank you, Kitty. □□

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