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From My Garden by H.E. Bates

Primulas

Species of the beautiful and much-loved primula family are to be found in almost every corner of the world, and it's difficult to name a bad plant among them

I have a very warm corner in my gardening heart for the primula family. Not that I know it all that well, for the simple reason that it is so vast, so widely distributed all over the world, that you would have to exchange your mind for an encyclopedia in order to deal with even a part of it. But what can be safely said is that few families attract so much affection, from our beloved primrose, cowslip and oxlip to the richer, taller beauties of Tibet and China and the Himalayas, and offhand I can't name a bad or remotely ignoble plant among them.

Where to begin? That's a problem. The merest glance at Farrer's celebrated book *The English Rock Garden* will show you why. Farrer lists no less than 95 pages of primulas—alpine, bog, herbaceous or of garden origin—embracing species from almost every corner of the world.

There are in fact over 500 species of primula, enough to satisfy or daunt even the experts. I use the word daunt advisedly, remembering Farrer's often-quoted remark that 'a cold awe sweeps across the gardener as he comes at last into the shadow of this grim and glorious name, which, there is no question, strikes terror no less than rapture into the mind of the boldest.'

Farrer goes on to tell us that the primula has acquired, and quite unjustly, 'a bad reputation in the garden'—solely, in his view, because generations of gardeners have got into their heads, and obstinately refused to get it out again, the wrong notion that primulas, as a whole, need damp, dank, shady conditions, a misconception arising possibly from the fact that our own primrose loves the damp and shade of woods and dikes. For many primulas, coming as they do from alpine regions, precisely the opposite is true. 'They are,' says Farrer, 'children of the broad sunlight on the high rolling turf of the mountain tops, and the rocks of crest and summit.'

At the same time there are, of course, many primulas that love to have their feet in damp or moist earth or near water. Among these are the candelabra section, which embraces *P. beesiana*, *P. bulleyana*, *P. pulverulenta*, *P. florindae*, and *P. nutans*. The name *pulverulenta* means 'powdered with meal', which is a common characteristic of so many primulas, including *P. auricula*, that lovely alpine,



with its intense silvery farina on the leaves and glorious bright yellow flowers, which has been the parent of so many hybrids in all manner of colours ranging through cream, yellow, mauve, purple, green, white, brown and sherry-gold.

I have nothing but adoration for these auriculas, so popular a century or less ago but later, for some inexplicable reason, out of favour. They are easily raised from seed, are exceedingly tough and will endure for years. Also, thank goodness, birds show none of that mischievous interest in the auriculas that they reserve for the primroses and polyanthus.

Two of the tallest and best of the candelabra group are undoubtedly *P. florindae*, a rich, strong, sweetly scented beauty from Tibet, and *P. pulverulenta*, of which the Bartley Strain contains many delicate and delicious shades of pink and rose.

Quite a few of these candelabra primulas seed themselves with the utmost freedom, so much so that they may well become an embarrassment if not, in fact, something of a nuisance. My favourite however is *P. bulleyana* with rich shades of orange, gold and apricot. It is also, I have found from experience, the longest lasting member of this excellent group.

Two other sections offer much delight. The progeny of *P. Juliae* now come in many, many shades: sulphur-yellow, lilac, claret, flame, maroon and white, all having the characteristic primrose-shaped flower and many having distinctly coloured leaves.

The other section is our dear old friend *P. denticulata* from the Himalayas, often called the Drumstick primula, a name I don't like, even though it describes the flower well. This, one of the earliest primulas to flower, coming as it does in March, is readily raised from seed, but the seedlings may be very variable, ranging from deep rich purple to rather washy mauves, so that a process of weeding out may be necessary in order to secure the more desirable forms. There is also a white variety, *P. denticulata alba*, which has its own cool white-green enchantment and comes quite true from seed. □□