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# Little People by H.E. Bates



This article is not intended for gardeners who like dahlias a foot across, chrysanthemums as big as footballs or giant vegetable marrows. It is entirely about 'little people', those small enchanters which for all their smallness give a lot of reward.

First the Epimediums. A friend of mine calls them 'appy mediums' and the description is by no means inapt. For some reason you don't see them very often and I can't think why; nor is there much written of them in gardening books, which seems to me an unfair slight on these fairy-like creatures which begin to expend their beauty as early as March and are utterly unexact in their cultural demands. They throw up a dense mass of handsome oval-shaped leaves delightfully veined in yellow-green and copper, which turn dry and brown by winter's end, when they must be shorn off so that the delicate trembling spikes of flower are free to open. The commonest colour in these flowers is pale yellow, and there is also a tangerine variety and one that is between pink and red. Not the least of this plant's virtues is that it also makes a good ground cover.

Wallflowers are so well known that you might well think there was nothing new to be said about them. But the Cheiranthus family offers several fascinating treasures that are all too little known. The sweetest of these—its scent is of the most exquisite richness—is probably also the oldest, now known as Harpur Crewe after a clergyman of that name who nursed it along in the nineteenth century. Its short spikes of brilliant yellow are fully double, utterly adorable and come in April and May.

Another fascinating and unusual wallflower is *C. mutabilis* which, as its name implies, changes colour as it grows, beginning a pale yellow, then turning to a browny-orange and finally to a soft Parma violet. But remember that none of these wallflowers is long-lived. They are, however, easily raised from cuttings.

Another elegant little treasure all too rarely seen is *Prunus amygdalus nana*. This is a dwarf almond, hardly two feet high, whose branches are thickly covered, provided birds leave them alone, with true pink almond blossom. But take care—this little beauty is also highly possessive. It suckers so badly in fact that it must be kept in check with a ruthless hand. It should be pruned hard after flowering in order to induce plenty of new growth for the following year.

Another family of much enchantment and highly suitable for a small garden are the dwarf shallows. Coming a little earlier than the almond they have the characteristic silver pussy catkins which later turn, as with the larger shallows, a pure fluffly gold, providing feasts for bees. There are several of these dwarfs and it is best to choose them at a garden centre.

Two other little treasures have recently come my way and I had seen neither of them before. One is a variegated

strawberry, in tones of bright green, pink and gold. This is completely prostrate and has a good companion in a variegated version of our old friend London pride, which is green and gold with reddish flowers. Both sit happily on a dry wall with another pleasant little dwarf for company. This is the silver-grey *Oxalis adenophylla*, with its curiously twisted leaves and delicate pink flowers. It looks altogether too delicate to have come from the harsh air of the Falkland Islands, but at least that fact ensures that it is quite hardy.

I have never been particularly fond of the familiar snow-berry tree bearing the awful name of *Symphoricarpos racemosus*. It has always seemed to me to be one of those Cinderella plants to be relegated to the back of dingy shrubberies and there to pine away a rather dim existence. But it is well worth noting that there is a variegated version of this, with yellow and green leaves, far less coarse than the other type, never more than three-to-four feet high, and bearing no berries, which is a wholly admirable little shrub for small gardens, leafless all winter but quite luminously charming all summer long.

Finally, I must mention surely one of the most enchanting of little people—the prostrate evening primrose *Oenothera missouriensis*. From the moment in April when its first bright crimson shoots appear to the last flourish of its wide candid yellow flowers in November it repeats its riches for us over and over again. I love it not only for the sheer freshness of its yellow saucers, fully open before breakfast on warm summer mornings, but also for the promise of next-day riches contained in its long pointed buds splendidly spotted with scarlet. A treasure indeed—quite hardy, perennial and easily raised from seed.

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