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From my Garden by H.E. Bates

The more popular gardening becomes, the more paralysing grows the cost of it. Or should we put it the other way round? The more expensive it becomes, the more people, it would seem, seek to engage in it. I am reminded of the story of a certain celebrated manufacturer of pipes whose business didn't prosper. His goods, though excellent, didn't seem to sell. Why, he would ask himself and his friends? 'Because,' a friend finally informed him, 'your pipes are too cheap. Charge double for them and see.' This he did, and promptly entered the hallowed realms of prosperity.

I am not suggesting that nurserymen and seedsmen are pulling the same trick, but alas, it is a hard, sad fact that the arithmetic of gardening is, as I say, becoming a paralysing affair. This, with the rising costs of labour, appalling postal and carriage charges, the expense of pots, fertilisers, composts and so on, is wholly understandable. Buying plants is no longer cheap. Yet the sight of carloads of gardeners queueing up at garden centres on warm May afternoons and of ladies willing, even eager, to buy a root of pansies for eighteen pence at local markets, merely serves to underline the paradox that if you make brass expensive enough there are plenty of people who will deem it to be gold.

Doing a little horticultural arithmetic of my own I discover, in turn, some more paralysing facts. I have a small bed, 20ft by 5ft, which I plant up every spring with plants that I am trying out for the first time, half-hardy things of varying delight, which might well be overshadowed in the big borders, and various special annuals. To plant this bed thickly and well, with the object of giving a massive show for four months and strangling all weeds in the process, we need about 200 plants. I would indeed be planting gold.

The only solution to all this is to raise all the plants oneself, and I have been looking into more efficient and less expensive ways of doing this too. Note that I do not say 'cheaper', for it is a word I have carefully put away in cotton-wool since an assistant in a gardening shop candidly declared to me: 'Don't take many minutes to spend five quid in 'ere, mate, does it?' It don't indeed.

Nevertheless I have been trying out two new or comparatively new processes of plant propagation with considerable relish and much success. When I first tried out Fison's Levington Compost, which looks much like ordinary light peat, I had nothing but total failure. This hurt me. For 40 years I had reckoned that if I could do nothing else in the garden well at least I could sow seeds with, on the whole, rich rewards. Armed with the simplest of tools, earthenware pans and my wife's flour sieve surreptitiously pinched from the kitchen, I calculate that I have, over the years, raised enough plants from seed to plant Kew Gardens.

But Levington proved me a dunce. On the other hand a young nurseryman friend was having with it a success that was absolutely scintillating. For years he had wrestled with insoluble problems over, of all things, antirrhinums (I wish we still called them snapdragons); they defied him. With

the well known novelist writes about how his garden grows

Family Increase



Levington, however, they flourished as if fed on manna and Napoleon brandy. My friend generously gave me a box of Levington and begged me to try again.

Fox-wise, I thought to test both him and Levington by sowing something a little more aristocratic than mustard-and-cress. I tried *sireptocarpus*, those brilliant trumpeters that I love even more than gloxinias, and never the easiest of things to raise. Up they came in ten days. I tried pentstemons; up in a week. I repeated the trick with primulas and polyanthus. I tried cuttings of fuchsia, begonia, dahlia, verbena; all struck with rapid success.

My first failure with Levington rose from not following the rules. 'Do not press the soil down hard; do not, except with the larger seeds, cover the seed,' these seemed heresies. I had my own rules—always see that the soil is firm and level, always see that the seed, except with the very finest, is properly covered. All bunkum. With Levington, after thoroughly soaking the compost, you simply sow the seed on the rough surface, without covering it. I am happy to say the results are exactly as if manna had flowed from the watering can, subsequently giving a root system as if the seed pans were providing an unlimited underground source of brandy.

The other propagating gimmick I have been trying out is Jiffy Pot No 7. These look like flattish round cakes made of dark brown flour that have been left in the oven too long. Popped into water and soaked for four minutes or so, they come out looking rather like faggots—I mean the sort you eat. Into each faggot you insert your cutting or seed (only large ones, such as sweet peas, melons and that sort of thing) and you can start looking for results in a matter of days. The faggots, which are of a peat composition encased in fine mesh, contain a certain amount of fertiliser, on which your cutting or seedling can feed for some time before being planted out or potted.

The results from these Jiffy faggots are great fun. Every day you can look for the first green spears of seedlings or the first white vermicelli-like roots poking through. In no time at all you have a complete plant, happy in its own house or bursting to be moved on to larger quarters. Labour is saved; all is sterilised and healthy; and there are no weeds. I experienced, I should say, only one half of one per cent failure with seed and cuttings.

The cost of these Jiffies works out at under 4d each. The profitable use of them, therefore, should obviously be mainly for things that are expensive to buy. I bought numbers of new dahlia tubers at 2s 3d each. Started into growth these yielded on an average half-a-dozen cuttings each; some provided as many as a dozen. Thus, if my stumbling arithmetic is correct, my new dahlia plants cost me about 7d each if the cost of the original tuber is included. A really ardent and assiduous gardener could, I think, get them for as little as 4d.

These are simply two of many ways of raising or increasing your garden stock in these difficult times. Of course I don't deny that you can do pretty well with certain old-fashioned methods, such as, for example, peat and coarse grit for cuttings. I have had great success with that too.