

# H. E. Bates:

**D**OWNSTAIRS at the old granary the garden already glowed with the first flowers of spring. But upstairs H. E. Bates, Britain's greatest short-story writer, lay in the south-facing bedroom, stricken by two heart attacks, fighting for his life, unable even to lift his head from the pillow to glimpse the crocus-studded acre below.

That was five years ago. Yet today, fit again and 66, he remains convinced that the garden played as important a part in his recovery as medicine itself. A neat figure in moss-green cardigan and Prince of Wales check trousers, he recalls from a chintz armchair:

"Each day my wife Madge brought me news of the garden and bunches of flowers from it—crocuses, primulas, primroses and so on. And the scent, the touch and the sight of them provided the buoyancy I needed so much.

"When you are very ill the importance of little things—trivial things you tend to take for granted when you are well—is magnified. So the garden became for me something to cling to. You could say it gave me the kiss of life.

"The suggestion that a garden saved a life may sound odd to some ears. Perhaps only a gardener would understand. But personally I think it would be difficult to over estimate the immense therapeutic value of a garden."

## In Rural Peace

It is just 40 years (or nearly 70 books and over 400 short stories) since H. E. Bates—born Herbert Ernest Bates of working-class parents—left the boot-and-shoe town of Rushden in his native Northamptonshire for the rural peace of the old granary at Little Chart, near Ashford, Kent. Even now the garden he hacked from a farmyard jungle of thistle and dock is still unfinished. And rightly so in his view.

"A garden that is finished is dead. It should be in a constant state of fluid change, expansion, experiment and adventure."

He often writes in the garden—in the seclusion of a summerhouse, laboriously in longhand with a fibre-tipped pen, a block of quarto typing paper balanced on his knee.

"When I come to describe a flower in one of my books or short stories I can actually smell it. Not because there's one nearby in the garden, but



# My Garden Saved My Life

because I have the scents filed away in my head.

"For example, I have only to think of night-scented stocks and I am wafted back 50 or 60 years to my father's garden where they were the first flowers I grew as a boy.

"It has always struck me as remarkable that the brain can photograph something intangible in this way. After all, you can't touch a scent or see it. Yet the photograph

remains there fresh, to be selected in a second or two whenever I need it."

The fragrance of flowers stimulates his creative powers, he finds.

"If, on my way to the summerhouse, I pass a bed of pinks or some honeysuckle, the task of writing becomes much easier. Violets have the same effect."

A list of his garden favourites would fill a book—and has, in fact (*A Love Of Flowers*, Michael Joseph, £2).

He is not without his pet hates either. Take old-fashioned sunflowers.

"My father devoted a corner of his garden to them and it was the one part I disliked. As a child I vowed I'd never grow them when I was old enough to have a garden of my own and to this day I never have."

Gardening is a subject that occupies his sleeping as well as his waking hours.

"I dream about it frequently. Furthermore, I dream in colour—really vividly—which I am told is quite unusual."

## New Friends

The exchange of plants, cuttings and seeds has brought him new friends—in all walks of life. "The sharing of one's treasures," he calls it.

"I have always maintained gardening is a great social leveller. You see evidence of this wherever you go. A lovely flower grows like a weed in a cottage garden. Yet the Lord of the Manor up the road despite the skill of professional gardeners and perhaps unlimited resources has no success with it at all. Rich and poor are on equal terms."

Madonna lilies represent his own biggest gardening failure.

"My father grew them splendidly. And I have tried all my life but to no avail."

Yet the loss of a plant brings no great sadness to him.

"One has to face the fact that you can't grow everything well. If you lose one thing there's always another to try instead."

He inherited his love of gardening from his father and grandfather and has passed it on to his four married children—Judith, Ann, Jonathan and Richard.

"My sons, who took no interest at all until a year ago, are now quite dotty about it. In fact, Jonathan has become one of the greatest gardening bores of all time."

Ideally he would like to see the whole world become one huge garden.

"More and more people both here and on the Continent are turning to gardening to escape from the rat race. And I'm sure they're happier for it. If this was taken to its logical conclusion the world would, I believe, be a much pleasanter place to live in.

"I know my own garden has brought me much happiness. In fact, I should like, quite literally, to end my days in it."

COLIN TALBOT