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From My Garden by H. E. Bates Two Elegant Families

As I write this I am looking out of my window, on a freezing December morning, across a lawn that appears to be a cloth, stiffly starched to purest whiteness. The sky is a vivid, steely blue. It has been the coldest night of the year. Yet under the walls of the house a 30-foot row of *Iris stylosa* is already in generous bloom, tenderest mauve, more fragile than any orchid, with a thousand yellow stars of winter Jasmine, *Jasminum nudiflorum*, hanging above.

Even this delicious blossoming is outdone by the glory of a great ten-foot high tree of *Viburnum fragrans*, its hundreds of pink, fragrant stars totally unaffected by frost. It shines in splendid contrast against a dark blue cypress—a glory that prompts me to say that if I were asked to name one family of garden shrubs that delighted me more than any other, it would be that of the *viburnums*, closely followed by the dogwoods or *cornus* family.

Viburnum fragrans comes from China, and the story of its discovery as a wild plant there is a piece of botanical romance. It was in 1913 that Reginald Farrer, on an expedition in the Da Tung Alps, in Northern China, first experienced the thrill of this *Viburnum*'s 'gracious arching masses, ten feet high and more across, whose naked boughs in spring before the foliage become one blaze of soft pink lilac-spikelets, breathing an intense fragrance of heliotrope'. Until that moment of discovery, although *V. fragrans* had long been a much-loved plant in gardens all over Northern China, its place of origin as a wild plant had been unknown.

Ever since that time, it has been a popular shrub in our own gardens, but with the special virtue that it gives of its best in mid-winter and not in spring. I am aware that some gardeners now feel it to be superseded by a hybrid between *V. fragrans*

and *V. grandiflorum*, namely *V. bodnantense* Dawn, a view I don't share. Perhaps I have been unlucky with Dawn and singularly fortunate with my two noble 30-year-old specimens of *V. fragrans*, but I wouldn't swop them for anything.

Two other favourites of mine are *V. carlesii*, April-flowering, utterly ethereal in its intoxicating fragrance, and *V. burkwoodii*, larger-flowered and almost as good. There is also a nice version of *V. carlesii* called Anne Russell. But here I must put in a sharp word against our mischievous friends the birds. After flowering happily for many years, my specimens of *V. carlesii* and *V. burkwoodii* began to present a sorry sight: buds dropping as if afflicted with some sort of botanical palsy, no flowers, an aspect of utter misery.

After three years I sought advice of my betters. 'No use,' I was told, 'everybody's got it. No cure. They've even got it at Wisley.' I sought advice of Wisley. 'Too dry,' they told me. 'A deficiency of this, that or the other.' All in vain. The palsy simply grew worse. All this time *V. fragrans* remained miraculously unaffected. I sought further advice. 'Palsy is there none,' I was told, 'your trouble is birds.' And so it seems it is. To this affliction, as with polyanthus, wistaria and even forsythia, the simple and effective answer is black cotton.

To the *Viburnum* family also belong the old, long-loved snowball trees or *Guelder Rose*, *V. opulus sterile*, and the equally common, but equally treasured *Laurustinus*, *V. tinus*. But good though these old favourites are they are far outdistanced by *V. tomentosum mariesii*, a wide-spreading, lace-cap flowered shrub of great architectural beauty, and another of equal architectural splendour, *V. davidii*, with its olive-green, deep-etched leaves. I must also confess here to a considerable affection for our two native *Viburnums*, which clothe the chalk hills and downs with much grace in spring.

The *cornus*, dogwood, family really falls into two categories: those which flower insignificantly but give their reward in the brilliance of their variegated leaves and winter bark, and those which flower with splendour, notably the North American dogwoods and those from Japan. Of the former, *C. elegantissima* has delicately variegated silver foliage and crimson bark in winter, the variety Westonbirt having even more vivid winter bark, as bright as sticks of scarlet sealing wax. (The description Westonbirt implies that the variety was raised at the Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire, as splendid a theatre of trees as you will find in the whole country, especially for rhododendrons and maples.) This Westonbirt variety associates dramatically with the yellow barked *C. stolonifera flaviramea*.

Both should be pruned hard every spring in order to gain greater brilliance of colour in the bark: an operation about which I am bound to confess I am faint-hearted. In consequence I prune half the tree one year and half the next.

Of the flowering dogwoods, I will give only three, since many of the most splendid of the species are too large for small gardens. *C. mas*, otherwise the Cornelian Cherry, flowers in spring, the bare branches being covered with small, bright yellow flowers, followed by big red berries. *C. kousa*, from Korea and Japan, is a wide-spreading tree with beautiful creamy-white bracts.

But for my money, the queen of them all is *Cornus florida rubra*. This choicest of small bushy trees appears to be covered in spring with a crowd of floppy pink handkerchiefs, hung out to dry. The variety *alba* isn't quite so attractive, but both provide a second period of joy in the autumn, when their leaves turn to warm, dramatic reds, and still a third in winter when they display the smoky grey-purple buds of next year's flowers. This, for me, is the shrub of shrubs, its only drawback being that in this country it cries for hot summers, in order to ripen its wood for flowering.

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