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From my Garden
by H. E. Bates

THE GREAT GERANIUM FAMILY



From the Greek—*geranos*, a crane: hence geranium, the botanical name, and cranesbill, the common one. The latter name derives from the shape of the seed capsules, which resemble the head and beak of the bird and are one of Nature's niftiest seed-spreading devices, a stiff little spring which ejects the seed a considerable distance when ripe. From the Greek also—*pelargos*, a stork: hence *pelargonium*.

It is, however, not of geraniums and pelargoniums, the tender beauties of summer bedding and greenhouse, that I am writing here, but of the hardy species, perfectly happy in rock garden or border: a race that has been called one of bewildering magnitude, stretching as it does far and wide, high and low, all over the world, including almost 20 native species of our own, among them two of my own favourite wild flowers, the little pink Herb Robert of dykes and hedges and the blue meadow cranesbill of waysides, the latter, at least, worth its place in the garden.

Geraniums have a considerable number of virtues, not the least of which is that many of them provide excellent ground cover, none requiring tying or support and almost all being easily raised from seed. A few may be difficult and among these, as you might expect, are two of the choicest: *G. argenteum*, probably the loveliest of all, its foliage a glistening silver, its flowers once admirably described as 'great diaphanous dogrose blossoms' of warm pink (I suppose not unlike a prostrate version of another delightful and only just barely silver creature, *Convolvulus cneorum*) and

G. traversii, from New Zealand, also silver-leaved and pink-flowered, needing a warm, sheltered spot for success.

Another favourite of mine is *G. wallichianum*, Buxton's Variety, the species coming from the Himalayas. This, with me, flowered in its first summer from seed, even though the seed was sown rather late. It is a perfectly prostrate little aristocrat, its blue flowers a little like smaller versions of *G. pratense*, but with variable white markings. It also has the virtue of flowering rather late in summer and then continuing on into autumn and even to the very edge of winter. Altogether a very desirable creature.

Just as attractive is *G. lancastriense*, also prostrate, with warm, flat pink flowers, delicately stencilled with purple. This is an infinitely refined version of *G. sanguineum*, which in its flamboyant magenta is altogether too much of a smack in the eye for my taste. Both belong to our native flora, *G. lancastriense* being so called because it thrives wild on the north Lancashire coast. This makes splendid ground cover.

So too does *G. dalmaticum*, its name clearly indicating its geographical origin. This also has pink flowers, with foliage so finely cut that it would be worth its place even if it never flowered. There is also a white variety—but, alas, not worthy of living space, since the white isn't true white, but only of a linen hue. By contrast, the white versions of both *G. pratense* and *G. grandiflorum* are infinitely worthwhile, the latter having an additional attraction in that its large, fine-cut leaves colour richly in autumn.

On the theory that delicate creatures

deserve the company of other delicate creatures, these many pink-flowered geraniums associate well with dwarf campanulas, of which there is a rich choice. *Campanula carpatica* and its many variations, *C. muralis*, *C. poscharskyana*, *C. E. K. Toogood*, *C. turbinata* are all charmers and all so undemanding as to be left alone to get on in continuous mateyness with the geraniums. *C. poscharskyana* has sometimes been cursed for its invasive tendencies, but I at least have never found it exhibiting these, and in any case you can put it into its place by practically ill-treating it every spring or autumn, spreading it liberally wherever ground cover is a need.

Other geraniums for which I have affection are *G. endressii*, a Pyrenean species—again rose-coloured—and its variety Wargrave Pink, with an extraordinarily long season of flower; *G. armenum*, magenta flowers with a black spot; and the aristocratic *G. renardii*, from the Caucasus, a very lovely thing which stands apart from the rest by reason of its leaves being clad on both sides with silk, the underside being a glimmering silver, the flowers white and delicately veined.

But there are, in my experience, few of this pleasing family to dislike, the one exception being a curiosity that is called *G. phaeum*, otherwise known as the Mourning Widow, clearly by reason of its blackish flowers, white-spotted and of no conspicuous size. I can think of quite a few widows for whom I have not a little affection; but not this one.