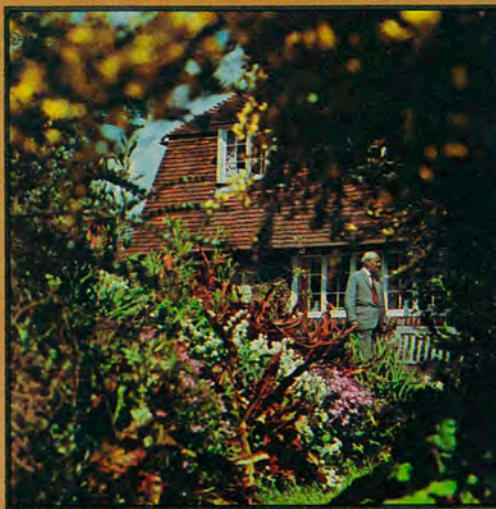


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From My Garden—H. E. Bates

RECKLESS CREATURES

H. E. Bates, well-loved writer of well-read books, created a home and a garden out of what was once a granary in a field. He writes every month on how his garden grows

When so much hideous Victoriana is collected merely because it is Victoriana and not because it has either intrinsic merit or beauty, it is hard to understand why some of the most enchanting flowers of which Victorians were so fond should now and then fall out of favour. Two of the most delicious things much loved in Victorian times were fuchsias and pelargoniums, both of which sadly declined in popularity some years ago but are now happily back where they should be, flourishing their infinite charms, both here and in America, at the top of the tree.

But what of another Victorian charmer, the auricula? In my boyhood they were always called 'recklesses'. Every cottage garden had its 'recklesses'. Everywhere they were loved, so fervently indeed that there were probably as many auricula societies scattered about the land as there are bingo clubs today. This is not to say that they were known and loved by Victorians alone. For centuries the French had also known and loved them. Almost every Dutch and Flemish flower painting of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries depicts auriculas and it seems probable that the flower was introduced into this country from the Netherlands somewhere about 1575. Gerard in his *Herball* mentions it in 1597 and a later herbalist, John Parkinson, described many varieties a century later.

Anyone who has seen the pure yellow *Primula alpina* growing in the spring Alps after the snows have melted, can surely never fail to be astonished that this refined and enchanting family of flowers should ever have fallen from favour. It can hardly have been because they were fussy or difficult. It is true that the family is really divided into two parts, the Show auricula, which certainly needs skill in cultivation and must be grown under the protection of glass, and the Alpine auricula, which is perfectly happy and fussless in gardens. The two descriptions are anyway slightly misleading, since the alpine varieties can be grown as pot plants too.

I went slightly dotty about auriculas some three years ago, when I was given a large pan of seedlings by one of that admirable and now disappearing race of gardeners who served devoted and penurious apprenticeships in the gardens and hot houses of the rich about the turn of the century. There must have been several thousand seedlings in that pan. With infinite care and labour I pricked out hundreds until, bored at last, I gave the rest to friends;

and the problem then arose as to what to do with the several hundreds I had kept. William Robinson had for ever been an early advocate of plants for ground cover, more especially under roses. I therefore put my auriculas into a bed of that admirable red and red-leaved floribunda, *Europeana*. Never was marriage more beautifully arranged or more delightfully consummated. The auriculas love the roses, revelling in the light shade provided by them in hot weather, and the roses love the auriculas, equally revelling in the coolness provided at their roots by the thickish handsome 'reckless' leaves that go on growing all summer.

I am now not at all sure that I don't prefer auriculas, in fact, to polyanthus. There are several reasons for this. First, our mischievous little friends the birds never touch them; they just don't appear to be interested. Second, auriculas can be left happily alone year after year, always looking pleasant, whereas polyanthus look infinitely dreary in summer and have to be taken up and divided and trenched away. And third, the colour range is not only delicious but unequalled as far as I can determine, by any other family.

Its range is from white to black, with an intermediate rainbow of yellows, greens, purples, blues, reds, maroons, lavenders and shades of infinite subtlety not easy to define. Some of these flowers are lusciously large to a point of looking as edible as ripe August plums; others are as small and delicate as oxlips; a number have wide, clearly defined eyes of white or yellow, like jewelled stars.

In attempting to describe the many elusive and alluring intermediate shades I am constantly reminded of the colourings of various beers and sherries. Subtleties of sherry browns and golds and pale beer-froth may perhaps seem a curious way of describing these rich and regal heads of Victorian velvet, but I find it apt. For those who prefer a comparison more fastidious I could refer to certain shades, equally lush and subtle, in some late tulips, where many of the deep browns and golds and purples, and of course greens, predominate, though without the lovely farinaeous dusting that is perhaps the auricula's crowning charm.

Named varieties are, by the way, expensive. Try seed, but only the best. It is slow to germinate but then patience, with all primulas, is one of the foremost virtues.

