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Garden in the Sun



by H. E. Bates

This month our favourite novelist (who is photographed above with his wife at home) leaves his garden in Kent to write about the luxurious, exotic flowers of Madeira

It is mid-January. I am sitting in the garden of one of the world's most renowned hotels: Reid's, Madeira, built by a certain William Reid, a Scotsman, in 1891. The sun is warm, the air balmy. To my right dark cliffs drop down almost perpendicular, to a translucent sea of morning glory blue. Immediately in front of me stretches the wide sheet of the South Atlantic, against which a veritable orchestra of crimson hibiscus trumpets is poised as if in readiness to perform some summer symphony.

To my left lies the comparatively small harbour of Funchal. Beyond are cliffs of smouldering red-brown rock, crowned by steep green slopes on which tier after tier of white, orange-roofed houses, together with a considerable number of churches, rise until a canopy of lead-blue cloud screens them from sight. At closer range it is possible to see that some of these orange roofs are not of the traditional Portuguese tiles. They are also canopies: dense masses of honeysuckle fingers of orange bignonia, Madeira's greatest winter joy.

In the garden a blackbird pecks at a yellow date, fallen half ripe from an enormous palm. A wall of pink, ivy-leaved geraniums swings away below a line of creamy freesias. Huge scarlet stars of poinsettia glare above big olive green aloes. Against another wall a brick red bougainvillea has an intense colour quarrel with a great mass of morning glory, darker blue than that of the sea. A single white rose of great purity, *Sin across*, struggles to reveal its face from a pale blue curtain of *plumbago capensis*. Tradition has it that it came from the Azores, to where it was originally taken by Chinese indentured labourers, so that a bush of it could be planted on every Chinaman's grave.

A great scent fills the air. Of roses, in full bloom, parma violets, freesias? A search among a veritable forest of climbers reveals it to be the delicious *Jasminum polyanthum*, a host of small white open trumpets and closed buds of raspberry pink. Very nearly hardy in southern England, it is to my mind the most desirable of all the jasmines.

Below them a strange brood of proud cockerels, their big cockscombs flaming orange and purple, seem to be staring at pots of what seem to be arum lilies glazed with bright pink

enamel. The cockerels are in fact stelitizias, the lilies anthuriums. Scarlet cannas, white gladioli, a rose-coloured, green-throated amaryllis, even a chrysanthemum—remember it is still only January—are in bloom, side by side with marigolds, phlox Drummondii, nemesias, snapdragons, Sweet Williams.

The persistence with which the Madeirans grow these annuals, and grow them badly, is a mystery. Thin, weedy, washy, with no trace of any kind of pedigree, they look positively pathetic against their royal, sub-tropical neighbours. Everywhere they abound with no trace of art or arrangement in the way they are planted, mocked on all sides by crotons, fat pots of orchids, veritable hedges of foliage begonias, golden acacias. These acacias, I note, are less well-known sisters of the mimosa we know so well and which is not grown at sea-level here but which, a thousand or so feet up, rears its great foamy yellow clouds of blossom to a height of 40ft or more.

This comparatively slight difference of altitude is in fact responsible for a new crop of riches. In the slightly cooler, damper air, blessed by not infrequent rain, there abound great magnolias, cups of purest white and pink against an azure sky, and that princess of shrubs, the magnolias' near relation, *Michelia doltsopa*, its blossoms so like elegant white silk handkerchiefs. And also two favourite purple treasures of mine: *Brunfelsia calycina* and *Tibouchina semi-decandra floribunda*, together with the scarlet claws of *Clianthus puceus*, the Parrot's Bill, and the twisted limbs of ancient wistarias which, for some unexplained reason, will not bloom much before April.

And of course camellias: thousands of camellias, in pure white, pure red, pure pink, in infinitely variable stippings of all three. Some of these trees too are ancient: a few are a hundred, perhaps even more years old, still blossoming winter after winter with elegant vigour, bestrewing the ground underneath them with carpets of fallen flowers. Drifting among them, and on all sides, stand splendid parades of arum lilies—still, I note, superstitiously hated by people who see in them nothing but funereal, melancholic associations—and occasional clumps of *Iris stylosa*, strangely enough blooming at the very same time as in my own garden in England, but, I am bound to note with some pride, not nearly so well.

And also a rarer, more striking parade, that of the proteas, those South African aristocrats that look somehow like enlarged sea anemones. Sad and ironical to think that, just as we are coming to know them better in England, thanks to the craze for flower arrangements, South Africa is in danger of losing many of its once bountifully distributed species, in all probably as many as a hundred of them, thanks to the prevailing idiocies of tourists. But here at any rate, on Madeira's lower slopes, thriving on the gentle winter rains that have the effect of clothing the hillside woodlands with ghostly skeins of grey, wood-like lichen, they are safe. Yellow, pink, red, white, they are arrestingly architectural and yet at the same time emblematic. More's the pity that so many motorists, whether it's primroses or proteas their possessive eyes alight on, are not only thieves but maddeningly stupid ones at that.

If this piece of mine occasionally sounds like a plantsman's catalogue, forgive but don't blame me. Blame Madeira's climate, infinitely blessed by sun and a whisper of the Gulf Stream, and its soft, prodigiously fertile earth, in colour somewhat the colour of cocoa; so fertile that I have in fact momentarily forgotten that it gives not only a boundless yield of flowers but of fruit too. Oranges, lemons, figs, custard apples, guavas, mangoes, avocado pears, passion fruit, papayas, melons, loquats, pineapples and, of course, grapes for producing the long celebrated Madeira wine, and bananas, the sweetest bananas in the world—what a feast, for both mouth and eye, this incomparable island offers. 