

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1969.

H. E. Bates The well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows

Fuchsias were first discovered in San Domingo in 1703. Named after Leonard Fuchs, a sixteenth-century doctor of medicine, they have been a joy to gardeners ever since. Since their first introduction into this country in 1788 their progeny have so increased in numbers that today the fuchsia lover is so torn by the variety and beauty offered that his course of affection, like that of true love, can never really run smooth. Old and new, English, Continental, or American, the numbers of hybrids charm and bewilder like a ravishing *corps de ballet* so many of them resemble, so that for one alternately applaud their beauty and raise my hands in despair in trying to solve the problem as to which of them should receive my devotion.

I suspect, sometimes, that the femininity of fuchsias is responsible for their great popularity. Their flowers are truly precursors of the mini-skirt. Under the butterfly-like frock of petals hang the brief corollas from which protrude the long, elegant, delicate legs of stamens. We cannot help being ravished by such grace, which inevitably reminds us, together with the colouring, of pastels by Degas or some aristocratic ballroom painted by Renoir.

As if their graces were not enough to seduce even the most modest of gardeners, they come to us echoing the words of the New Testament—our yoke is easy, our burden is light. Anyone can grow fuchsias. They ask for no fuss. You may fight with your alkaline soil in a profitless struggle to grow rhododendrons, camellias, azaleas and so on. You give up in despair when seemingly undemanding treasures such as Madonna lilies constantly fail. But fuchsias demand little but a straightforward, common-sense affection. You grow them in pots or beds; indoors or outdoors; with little heat or no heat; as bushes or standards; as umbrellas or cascades. They may be feminine, but they are certainly not hard to please.

I do not propose to give here a long list of varieties. This could only really resemble one of those fabulous Somebody-begat-Somebody-begat-Somebody-Else family trees from the Old Testament. In front of me is a book naming some 2,000 hybrids and species, old and new, hardy and tender. I have grown, at one time or another, 50, 60, perhaps as many as 70 of them. Some of these are fresh from America; some were introduced when Queen Victoria had scarcely got used to having her

elegance without fuss



head under a crown; many, lost to cultivation since their Victorian heyday, have been rescued and reintroduced. Others, like the dear old Lena, introduced in 1862, or Abundance (1870), a very free-flowered little favourite of mine, the big blowzy barmaid Phenomenal (1869) and her lovely white sister (1873), Mrs Marshall, date unknown, or Marinka, a charming self-colour in pure warm red, go on for ever and ever. Ballet Girl has been showing her skirts and legs since 1894 and has rightly become the symbol of the entire family.

Fuchsias are increased so readily by cuttings—though I find that most of the older varieties are by far the easiest—that about ten years ago I found that I was growing more of them than I could really manage, especially in winter. I consequently grew lazy, leaving many of them to fare for themselves in open ground. Most of these have happily survived the ten succeeding winters, and appear ready to go on for the next ten, providing always that the old stems are not cut back until new shoots rise from the plant base in spring. There are of course many truly hardy varieties: *F. riccartoni* being probably the best known; *F. gracilis* and its variegated type Variegata, with pink and silver foliage, being quite indestructible; *F. coccinea*, fast growing and free of bloom; Mrs Popple; Mrs W. P. Wood, an improved white *F. magellanica alba*

(the type first having been introduced in 1789) and Margaret Brown, which is a strong bush, also very free. Some of these, notably *F. riccartoni*, make very attractive hedges.

My favourite fuchsia? I have no doubt of it at all. First introduced in 1855 and a hybrid from the very first species, *Triphylla*, introduced in 1703, Thalia is a perfect aristocrat, and I cannot think why it is not grown more. Of the many visitors to my garden every summer almost all stop to gaze, wonder and finally dissolve into a kind of sedate madness over Thalia. It must be ten years since I started with one plant, from which I have given away scores and scores of progeny, still leaving myself with a couple of hundred.

It is difficult to declare if Thalia's foliage, a deep bronze-red flushed with a touch of green, or its long rich orange-scarlet ear-ring of flower, is its more attractive virtue. Thalia, in fact, has the depth, character, pedigree and richness of a great old dark red rose. There are other *Triphylla* hybrids, notably *Gartenmeister Bonstedt*, also orange-scarlet in flower but with a more purplish leaf, and *Heinrich Heinkel*, a salmon-cerise flower with bronzy leaves. Both have the long refined ear-ring of flower that is, I think, the chief *Triphylla* enchantment.

Planted out in summer, Thalia makes an incredibly rich display from late June until October. Lifted before frost touches the very tender leaves, it will flower all winter under glass and then flaunt on again in summer. The difficulty sometimes is to get it to rest! There was a time indeed when I had plants which had scarcely stopped flowering for four years. Thalia, against the silver of *Cineraria maritima* or *Cenaurea gymnocarpa*, shows up dramatically; it is equally happy in the tender violet company of *Verbena venosa* or *Aster Frikartii*. But one of these fine summers, I am going to marry it with another favourite fuchsia of mine, all too rarely seen too, I think, Sunray. In infancy, the leaves of this variegated variety are of two shades of pink, deep claret and pale rose. As they age they turn to pink and gold, with a mere touch of palest green and silver. Just as primroses and violets, married together, form our first symbol of spring, so I hope the marriage of these two old fuchsia aristocrats, one given to us in 1855, the other in 1872, will provide me, and I hope you, with an entrancing symbol of full summer.

© Evensford Productions Ltd, 1969