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## From My Garden by H.E. Bates

The well-known novelist talks about the many different evening primroses he has grown in his garden



### Evening Primroses

Are you fond of wine? Or does your taste for it need to be stimulated? If the answer to the second question is 'Yes' then you might perhaps consider the Evening Primroses, how they grow, since their classical name, *Oenothera*, comes from two Greek words, *Oinos*, meaning wine, and *thera*, taste, legend having it that the roots of *Oenothera biennis* are said to encourage a taste for wine.

Whether this is true or not it is certain that the family contains many enchanters, both dwarf and tall, none of whom is difficult, all merely asking for ordinary soil and a place in the sun. All come from the North American continent, but two species, *O. biennis*, the common Evening Primrose which I suppose everyone knows, and *O. lamarckiana*, have naturalised themselves in this country on sandy and waste places, though never quite in the truly prodigious quantities that you see as soon as you cross the Channel into France.

We tend sometimes to think of the tiresome business of changing plant names as an entirely modern game, but 40 years ago Reginald Farrer, the renowned alpine expert, was writing thus: 'American botanists have been having such games with the Evening Primrose that there is really no knowing what is what, unless we ignore all these superfluous fal-lals and stick simply to the good old name.' And I should think so too.

Evening Primrose is, by the way, half a misnomer, since a good many of the species and among them some of the most ravishing, open by day and go to bed in the evening,

when others of the family are just unfolding. *O. acaulis* is one of these: a very dwarf little thing, no more than 6in high, which bears pure white trumpets by day, the flowers gradually turning to pale pink as they fade away in the evening. This plant, a sweetie, is also known as *O. taraxacifolia*.

Another day-bloomer, but also at night too, and quite my favourite among all the Evening Primroses, is *O. missouriensis* (syn. *macrocarpa*), a truly magnificent plant. Low-growing, with handsome narrow pale green leaves, it has spur-like buds of green, beautifully spotted with red, which open to great ravishing chalice of pure citron yellow that are an endless joy from July onwards. It comes with the greatest of ease from seed, as indeed do most, if not all of the tribe, and probably looks at its best trailing over a big rock or flopping over a dry wall. Queenly, I think, is the word for it, truly a queenly primrose.

It is many years since I first grew *O. odorata*, strictly a biennial, though one never need worry about that, since it is always prodigal in seeding itself everywhere. This, as its name implies, is sweetly scented, as indeed are several other species. It is also a true evening bloomer, though there are always a few of its refined, tender creamy-yellow flowers still open as late as mid-morning. It is also capable of a sort of magic trick. Indeed one of the most fascinating sights I ever saw in my garden was to stand one hot summer evening and watch, before my very eyes, the flowers of *O. odorata* unfurling petal by petal, as if excited by some hidden spring, from the slender soft coppery buds. This too flowers for most of the summer. William Robinson, the famous Victorian gardener, incidentally called it the most interesting flower he had ever seen in a garden at night.

*O. fruticosa* also known as Sundrops, is a worthwhile plant too, perennial, about 1ft high, covered with medium-sized deep yellow flowers, again over a long period of the year. It looks well in the front of the border but it is, perhaps, not long-lived, a remark I base on the fact that after enduring even the scourge of the winter of 1963, it unhappily gave up its ghost in the miserable protracted winter of 1969-1970 so that I must now set about acquiring it again.

Similar to *fruticosa* is *glauca*, a handsome thing of shrubby growth, again yellow-flowered and long in bloom. An even finer plant is its variety *fraseri*. Another good one is *O. speciosa*, with many large white flowers which gradually turn, like those of *O. acaulis*, to delicate rose. It is a true perennial and may be increased with ease from cuttings, division or seed. There is also a true pink variety, *rosa*, which I confess I don't know but which is reputed to be equally good. Nor do I know *O. riparia*, but that excellent plantsman, Roy Elliott, sings its praises warmly, saying it is 'a constant summer delight from July until late September.' He confers the same accolade on *O. triloba*, another biennial which obligingly seeds itself everywhere.

In heaping further praise on *O. speciosa* he finds it masquerading under as 'impressive a range of aliases as there are forms of pasta on an Italian menu.'

As he says, and as Farrer implied 40 years ago, 'Heigh-ho for the botanists,' or a plague on them, whichever you prefer. If you think the botanists as tiresome as I do you'll probably settle for a glass of wine. □

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