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From My Garden by H.E. Bates

There are some families of plants—salvias and euphorbias being good examples—which have far too many children, so that it is impossible to know or enjoy more than a tiny fraction of them. Others have only too few. I am thinking now of the abutilons, which number among their cousins the mallows, the hollyhocks and the tree-hollyhock or *Hibiscus Syriacus*, formerly known as *Althaea frutex*.

Unfortunately, abutilons are not hardy, most of them coming from South America, but in the case of two of them, *A. megapotamicum* and *A. vitifolium*, this need be no deterrent, since both are readily raised from cuttings or seed. (A very nice Mrs Malaprop I know, said the other day that she thought prison was a good detergent — which is a very good near bull's-eye if you think of it.)

I have sung the praises of *A. megapotamicum* before and have tried to describe it, though perhaps not very successfully. (The megapotamicum bit means, it would seem, 'from the great river'.) This lovely thing has delicate pendent flowers in red, yellow and black, so that I sometimes think of them as exotic fuchsias or, better perhaps, as Chinese lanterns. It will make a thin, loose shrub of up to 6ft and I have known it to thrive outside on a wall, where it will flower profusely all summer. A safer method with it, I find, is to keep it in a large pot and plunge it outside from June to October. Cuttings taken in spring will flower very quickly and in a cool house may well go on flowering into, and even through, the winter.

A. vitifolium describes itself, since the leaves are vine-shaped, as in fact they are in *A. megapotamicum*. Here I must qualify my remarks about hardiness by saying that my own vitifolium (which has now died of old age) survived the bitter winters of 1940 and 1947 and even survived a transplant when it couldn't have been less than 15 years old. It was also generous with seed. Its flowers, which marry beautifully with the grey-green vine-shaped foliage, are slightly floppy and of the purest, softest mauve. There is a white variety and I heard of a double or semi-double version. Altogether it is a desirable and beautiful thing.

Vine-shaped, too, are the leaves of *A. darwinii*, from which most of the commonly seen hybrids in yellow, rose, orange and red derive. These have the added charm of delicious mottlings and marblings, mostly in gold and green, on the leaves, which in consequence are rather more to be desired than the flowers. Most good seed catalogues list these hybrids which, if sown under glass early in the year, will start to flower by the end of July. It seems to me that the lovely variegation of leaf makes the flowering a matter of less importance, more especially as the flowers, which are again rather like Chinese lanterns in appearance, are not very long lasting.

This month, the well known novelist tells us about some more of the favourite plants that grow in his Kentish garden



Of, Among Other Things, Grass Skirts

The habits of old professional gardeners die hard; and for the life of me I can never understand why this abutilon is for ever used as what is repulsively called 'a dot plant'. Look into any public park in summer and there you will see it, stuck about in formal beds of geraniums, alyssum, lobelia and such things, like an unfortunate afterthought. The whole thing is an insult to a plant so beautiful in itself that its rightful place is surely either on its own or grouped with other shrubs or sub-shrubs for contrasting effect of foliage. Since it will grow up to 6ft high, it is surely worth a separate place of honour. It will also do splendidly in the greenhouse and will make an extremely striking and easy house plant, too. Both seeds and cuttings are child's play.

There is no need here to say anything of hollyhocks, since everyone knows them so well, but the tree mallows *Lavatera arborea*, having purple flowers, and *L. olbia*, with soft pink flowers, are, I rather think, not very well known. Here again the leaves are vine-shaped. *L. arborea* is the less hardy of the two and though a hard winter will knock *L. olbia* about a bit it usually recovers quickly if pruned back in spring and is anyway so prodigal with seed that its progeny may even become a slight embarrassment. A good sub-shrub this, with its pale grey leaves, to light up the back of a big border. The hibiscus I'm now writing about mustn't be confused with the hibiscus of the tropics, of which there are species other than those that provide Polynesian maidens with those magnificently inviting blossoms which they stick into the side of their blue-black hair. (Speaking of Polynesian girls, you can dismiss from your mind the idea that their grass skirts are made of grass. They are in fact made from the bark of one of the tropical hibiscus, which also has flowers with the fascinating habit of changing colour from pale cream in the morning to deep red at night, when they fall from the tree.) No, the hibiscus to which I refer are hybrids of *Althaea frutex*, with mallow-like flowers of blue, pink, red, white, violet, both single and double, and in several cases with prettily blotched petals. These shrubs are hardy, neat in habit and need little or no pruning. But perhaps their greatest virtue is the lateness of their flowering. August, September and even October are the months when they come into their own and when their highly attractive blossoms are consequently doubly precious. They are not at all unlike the tropical hibiscus, though much smaller, and I suppose you can, if you wish, wear them in your hair to indicate, as Polynesian girls do, whether you are fancy free or not.

But I can't remember whether you wear them on the right side for 'come hither' or the left side for 'go away!' □□

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