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# A Riotous Assembly

From My Garden by H.E. Bates

In a cottage garden in a peaceful Kentish village, a rich, delightful clash of colour stopped our favourite novelist in his tracks...

On a beautiful July day in the glorious summer of 1970, in one of Kent's loveliest and most celebrated villages, I suddenly came upon a riotous assembly. No: not of drug addicts, raving students, protesting Pakistanis, opponents of apartheid or anything of that sort, but simply a riotous assembly of annuals in a cottage garden.

Unplanned, unprofessional, uninhibited, it was a blazing kaleidoscope of scarlet, purple, pink, orange, white, yellow and just about every other colour you care to think of. Salvias, petunias, snapdragons, fuchsias, stocks, sweet peas, marigolds, nasturtiums, and much else: all had been planted by a prodigal hand, haphazard, colour clashing against colour, so that no single inch of earth could be seen. And the total effect, which ought by all the rules to have been vulgar, was somehow right, rich and delightful.

After that first view I suppose I saw this example of riotous assembly every week from July until the November woods glowed on the hillsides above the village in a magnificence of burnished gold and copper. By that time, in a long mild spell, asters, dahlias and chrysanthemums had added a little more riot to the assembly, so that the autumnal richness was even wilder than that of summer had been.

I was so fascinated by all this that if it hadn't been for one fact I might well have been tempted to plan, for 1971, a riotous assembly of my own. The one fact was, however, that I had already done so. In one part of my garden—it was once the stable-yard—I have five formal oblong beds, edged with York stone, that form a cross. In spring these are always pretty with



tulips, mostly the lily-flowered varieties, and a particularly good dark blue forget-me-not. In summer they have generally been planted with fuchsias and *Verbena venosa*, but the splendid summer of 1969, though suiting so many things very well, proved altogether too dry for fuchsias and the whole plan was, alas, a near-failure.

It was to prevent this happening again that I decided to experiment with my own form of riotous assembly. By planting 20 different things, instead of two, I ought to be able, I reasoned, to insure myself against whatever kind of summer might prevail. Nor, I also reasoned, would there be only flowers; I would take out a second insurance with foliage.

Accordingly I settled not only for my favourite *Verbena venosa* and some fuchsias, which I cannot bear to be without, but also fibrous begonias, gloriosa daisies (what marvellous value these rudbeckias are, blooming as they do for the better part of six months; I will never be without them); *Convolvulus tricolor*, most lovable in its purple, white and gold, *Nicotiana Lime Green*, *Dimorphotheca ecklonis* (I call it the government flower because it opens at 9 in the morning and shuts at 4 in the afternoon), the gentian-blue *Salvia patens*, *Phlox drummondii* and some geraniums. The geraniums were, however, part of the foliage insurance scheme. With their delightful variegations of leaf in silver and green, gold and green, and pink and green, they would give pleasure whether the summer was wet or fine. As it was, the summer was glorious and to the leaf variegations were added a brilliance of rose and cherry flowers.

The foliage insurance scheme was also responsible for the silver-leaved gazanias, the silver feathers of *Pyrethrum ptarmiciflorum*, and coleus. At this point, I am sure, the purists will start mumbling into their beards. Let them mumble. I am very fond of



coleus and I see no reason why they shouldn't be part of an outdoor riotous assembly. They are very lovely if used informally. Another part of the foliage insurance scheme might well have come from *Lobelia cardinalis*, with its grenadier-scarlet flowers and coppery-red leaves, or those dwarf dahlias with the same leaf-and-flower combination of colour.

One plant, however, strayed into the scheme not by design but by accident. For most of the summer it remained a mystery. Having been a gift in the first place, it had no name. It looked like a hydrangea of sorts but clearly wasn't. It also looked like part of the foliage insurance scheme, with its handsome tongue-like leaves with rich dark veins. But would it flower? July, August and the first week of September brought no answer. Then buds appeared and in due course opened: sprigs of pink and white coral, delicate and entrancing.

At this point the detective in me got to work. The plant, I had been telling myself for some time past, was surely a polygonum, one of the knot-weeds (docks, if you must know) and so it proved. A little investigation showed it to be *Polygonum campanulatum* and it is, I assure you, well worth making a note of.

So my riotous assembly was a success too, flowering on and on, as it did, until the end of November. It also proved what I had suspected when I first came upon the cottage garden riot in July. It isn't by always following the rules that, in gardening, you necessarily get the best results. In other words you can have, for my money, 50 gardens planned by experts from Chelsea in exchange for one coat-of-many-colours scheme unplanned by a cottager on the south slopes of the Kentish hills. Experts, of course, have their uses; but now and then it's nice to be a little dizzy for a change. □□

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