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## From My Garden by H.E. Bates



The well-known novelist talks about some more of his favourite flowering plants

### Oh! me of little Faith

As far as flowers are concerned, the word annual has on me a dual effect: on the one hand a slight distrust coupled with a certain sadness, on the other a sense of ephemeral, evanescent enchantment. It is rather like trying to capture the brief distilled joy of a May morning in your finger tips and pretending that it is, or is going to be, permanent, when you well know that frost may darken it by night time.

In other words I like many annuals but lack faith in them. The evanescent enchantment lies mostly in the memory: the recollection of Edwardian summers when my father and grandfather grew great purple, mauve, crimson and white ostrich-feather asters, spicy stocks, snapdragons, Virginia and night-scented stock, mignonette and fragrant joys of that sort.

But annuals, for all their charm, make work; and are also, if you must buy them, expensive. Many, in bad summers, are useless for prolonged display. For my part I have at last said a sad farewell to zinnias, petunias, asters and many other sun-drinkers who languish with a kind of floral foot-and-mouth disease in our more dismal years. Perhaps someone will one day tell me why it is that in Switzerland petunias flourish like companies of angels, even in the poorest of Swiss summers, while they sulk into premature decline in ours.

As a compensation for all this, it is comforting to know that there are, however, a pretty large number of perennials, many of them of permanent excellence, which may be treated as annuals, flowering the first year from seed and then paying increasing dividends thereafter. There are also half-hardy perennials which may be similarly raised in the sure hope that they will flower the first year even if their subsequent life is one of slight uncertainty.

Among these is that faultless treasure which I have recommended over and over again—incomparably the best half-

hardy perennial that may be raised as an annual: namely *Verbena venosa*.

Even as late as October I can look from my study window and see everywhere dense forests of the verbena's rich purple, more intense and beautiful in the soft autumn air than they were in July and August, when even then they had been in flower since the latter days of May. What value! Six months of trouble-free glory from a plant that is not only a joy in itself but an infallible magnet in late summer and autumn for crowds of butterflies, humming-bird hawk-moths and very often those delightful palpitating creatures, the little mealy-brown Y-moths.

*Verbena venosa* has a taller sister *V. bonariensis*, also of long flowering duration, which would make good company for another annual of the easiest cultivation and one which I was glad to see is becoming more and more grown: *Rudbeckia tetra* Gloriosa. These huge golden daisies, with their many chocolate-brown and near-black variations, also flaunt their gloriosa heads in the late autumn air as beautifully as they did three months earlier. What value again indeed. If the Van Gogh-like golds and browns should prove a little strong for your taste you can always try the more refined *Rudbeckia monplaisir* (My Joy) and the newer and still more refined Irish Eyes, with its pure apple-green prominent eye.

*Lychnis chalcidonica* is a plant much seen in cottage gardens, though I have always found its cardinal scarlet heads a little too hot for my taste. But hardly ever do you see its softer and more beguiling relative *Lychnis haageana* and I often wonder why. This too is a perfectly hardy perennial which will flower the first summer from seed. It is probably best described as a large ragged robin, though not very ragged, in varying shades of orange, yellow, crimson and scarlet. From a March sowing it will begin to flower in early summer and though of not such long duration as either the Rudbeckias or the Verbenas it will rise happily to give repeat performances in future years.

*Physostegia virginiana*, sometimes called the Obedient Plant because you can twist its snapdragon-like flowers round into whatever position you like and make them stay put, thus doing a little show-off trick to your friends, is a plant for which I have never had more than a mild affection. Its white form, however, *P. Summer Snow*, is a real enchantress. This too is at its pure white best in late October, having been sown in April. Not a dramatic plant by any means, it has the same refined appeal that I find in white violets, *Cyclamen neapolitanum* and certain of the smaller hardy geraniums. It is altogether a nicer plant than its better known sister and you can still play the same tricks with it.

As to the smaller geraniums, that quietly lovely little thing *G. wallichianum* Buxton's Variety, a good ground cover, will also flower happily the first summer from seed and I am hoping that the same may prove true of a plant quite new to me which I once saw in full bloom, also in late October, in the Bernese Oberland. Quite unlike lobelias which are still unimaginatively bedded out in millions every spring, *Lobelia vedrariensis* looks much more like a 3ft dark purple campanula, which in fact is what I guessed it to be.

It struck me as being a very desirable, stately thing and I shall certainly try it this year.

All the above plants I offer merely as *hors-d'œuvres*. There are scores of others that will make your main horticultural course more rich, satisfying and long-lasting. Search for them. They will, on the whole, give you less work and greater reward than those annuals in which my faith, as I grow older, grows less. □□

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