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From My Garden by H.E. Bates



Variegations on a theme

H. E. Bates discourses on the fascination of plants with leaves of different colours

A correspondent, a friend of that celebrated gardener the late Margery Fish, sent me a list of certain plants from her Cornish garden, adding that if I cared to have plants or cuttings of them she would be glad to send them. I thanked her for her generous thought, saying that I should be delighted to receive her gift but adding that I was ashamed to confess that I had never heard of the plants she named.

'No need to be ashamed,' she wrote back and went on to name two distinguished horticulturalists who had never heard of them either, the reason being that most of the plants were not commercially grown. Nor could I find them in any of my many books on gardening. Some had come from gardens in Cornwall, others from old Irish gardens. *Vestia lycioides* was one which eluded me completely; *Berberis darleryensis* Pink Pearls was another.

When the plants and cuttings finally arrived they were accompanied by a note in which my correspondent confessed to being 'slightly batty about variegated things'. This pleased me, since I am slightly batty myself about such plants, with their attractive particoloured leaves. I was even more pleased to find that the parcel of plants and cuttings contained a lot of variegated things I didn't possess, among them a deep golden ivy from Tralee, a variegated Portugal laurel (*Prunus lusitanica*), a variegated laurestinus (*Viburnum tinus*), a variegated hydrangea, a variegated London Pride, a silver

privet and a weigela of a different variegation from the one I already possessed.

All this prompted me to do a little tour of investigation in my own garden, just to see the number of variegations it contained. I was surprised and delighted to find that it had far more than I had supposed. Undoubtedly the queen of them all was *elaagnus pungens aurea Maculata*, which with its brilliant gold-and-green leaves is the most lovely and luminous of things, magnificently alight, especially in winter. This indispensable beauty is never a very large shrub, but it utterly dwarfs a real miniature poppet, of which I am very fond, called *Hypericum moserianum tricolour*, an almost prostrate Rose of Sharon with pink, green and gold leaves and little yellow flowers of much refinement. (My Cornish correspondent had included cuttings of another *elaagnus*, *Fredericii*, of slightly paler gold than *pungens aurea*.)

It was slightly late in the year for *Phlox paniculata* Norah Leigh, a very worth-while thing treasured for its cream-and-green foliage rather than its washy pink flowers. But two variegated periwinkles, one with large leaves and large mauve flowers and the other correspondingly smaller in every way, were still flourishing happily. So were a gold-green fuchsia, the name of which I have unfortunately lost, and a gold-green hebe, still bearing its bright purple bottle-brush flowers. This is *Andersonii variegata*, not reliably hardy but so easy to grow from cuttings that it can be saved without difficulty in a cold greenhouse or frame.

Another favourite charmer of mine, the variegated form of *Fuchsia gracilis*, is quite hardy if its pruning (to ground level) is left until spring. Not at all hardy, of course, are the many variegated geraniums, which are worth a whole article to themselves and will probably get it one day.

Another plant I both like and admire and which, alas, is cursed with an undeserved reputation born of suburban gardens is the variegated laurel. It too, with its brilliant green-and-gold, brings a lovely touch of illumination to shady and/or wintry places. The same is true of the excellent variegated hollies, and yet another shrub cursed with a bad reputation, our much misused friend the golden privet, which even that great gardener Gertrude Jekyll didn't despise. On the contrary, she used it in her borders with great effect. Another good small shrub not often seen is the variegated snowberry, which has the misfortune to bear the name *Symphoricarpus orbiculatus variegatus*, an affliction it certainly doesn't deserve.

I think I have now grown most of the variegated hostas, both silver and gold, and very charming they are, but it was only recently that I acquired a gold-and-green sedum, which has a cool and tranquillising effect. A nice obliging little miniature is a silver thyme, which looks well in light shade. *Euonymus* Silver Queen will also tolerate shade, even quite deep shade, and its green-and-silver leaves provide further charm by being slightly touched with pink in winter. It makes excellent ground cover too. Two maples are worthy of a good place, especially in front of a very dark green conifer or yew—*Acer negundo variegata* and *A. Drummondii*. And lastly a variegated bergenia. This I have seen in Madeira, which makes me suspect it may not be hardy here. But I am still searching for it and perhaps one day I may be lucky enough to find it. □□

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