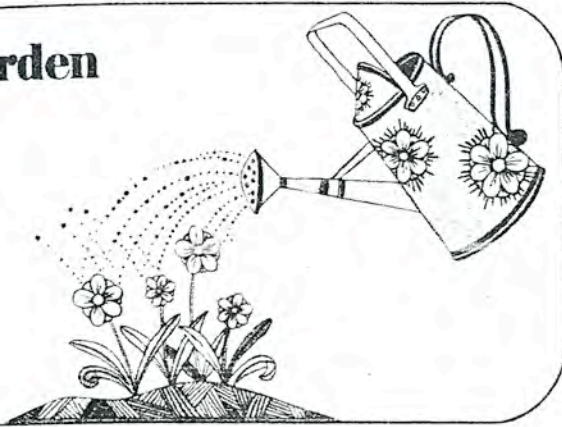


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From My Garden

A Bunch of Summer Aristocrats

by H. E. Bates



It may seem a long time to summer but now, nevertheless, is the time to talk of it. Useless for me to tell you in July, what to plant to flower in July. I believe that it is just as easy, very often, to grow aristocrats as nonentities; and here, therefore, is a bunch of summer aristocrats.

I call a plant excellent when it has the following virtues: that of being able to stand on its own legs without stakes; of producing flowers for three, four or perhaps even five months on end; and of showing incontestable grace of form. The following plants will all do this and, in consequence, will call for little labour and give infinite pleasure.

One of the warmest corners of my heart is reserved for the verbena family and I now present three of them, one of which is, to my mind, far and away the finest half-hardy perennial that can be raised as an annual from seed. When I call *Verbena venosa* half-hardy I should immediately qualify this by saying that in the mildest of winters—that of 1966-67 being the most recent example—it will survive unscathed, and as an extra reward will sow itself freely.

The plant is stiff, needing no support, and has rather spare foliage that is crisp and almost rough. Its myriad heads of pleasing purple, not unlike that excellent lavender *Hidcote* (an aristocrat in its own right, beating all other lavenders into a cocked hat), begin to appear in June and persist until the severest of frosts. They grow denser and denser as summer fattens into autumn, until the whole plant—it needs to be planted in generous masses—is a great royal sheaf. It also has the supreme virtue of doing almost as well in a wet summer as in a hot one, this virtue being a fourth to add to my three listed above.

V. venosa, which mixes marvellously well with fuchsias, geraniums and indeed an endless number of things, also has a taller relative, *V. bonariensis*, which has the same family virtues: easily raised

from seed, long-flowering, almost hardy. Though growing to a height of five feet, its crisp rough stems need no staking and are, to my eye, of pleasing architectural beauty, the stems spreading in stiff angular fashion, but lightly, so that the whole plant can be seen through. It, too, has purple flowers which, like those of *V. venosa*, flower long and happily in both sun and rain. It seeds itself rather freely—but let it. It gives a charming touch of informality to other things without upsetting them.

My third verbena is a beauty of burning Mephistophelian splendour named *V. Laurence Johnston*. Its fine clear red is never scalding, as in certain salvias, and never irritates or jars the eye. Its constant demand is for sun, sun and yet more sun. Having this, it glows from June into autumn with always increasing splendour. It does not, however, bear seeds, and must always be raised from cuttings, which may be readily rooted to winter in a cold frame. Truly an aristocrat of aristocrats.

Also ever hungry for more and more sun is another marvellously good plant, all too rarely seen—and for the life of me I can never think why. I playfully mock this South African treasure, *Dimorphotheca Ecklonis* (Cape Marigold), by calling it 'the Government plant,' since it opens its flowers at nine in the morning and promptly shuts them at four in the afternoon. This is very wrong of me, since this plant is not only an aristocrat but, to my mind, a very feminine one. Its wide daisy-shaped flowers are of perfect whiteness, not starchy or harsh, but of a glistening silkiness that contrasts superbly with the vivid blue eye, and its delicious and delicate sprinkling of brightest orange dust.

Mad dogs and Englishmen traditionally go out in the midday sun and how wise they are if their reward is to see a mass of *Dimorphotheca Ecklonis* in full bloom. Seed sown in early spring will give plants

that bloom the same summer; cuttings taken in autumn will winter in a cold frame and will also give flowers under glass in late winter and spring.

This plant irresistibly recalls another favourite of mine, a plant that that alpine expert, Reginald Farrer, once generously called 'the noble blue cupidone with the darker eye, very beautiful in wild rough places in the South of France,' a tribute both splendid and well deserved. *Catananche caerulea*, commonly called Cupid's dart, is perhaps best described as a sort of everlasting cornflower: flowers of enchanting delicacy, classic mauve, held in cups of rustling *immortelle* silver. From about mid-June it flowers with unfussing prodigality that constantly delights. A long-lived perennial, it comes easily from seed (this is the best way of acquiring it, since you must have good generous groups of it). There is also a white variety and a variety major, an improvement on the type.

Lastly, a convolvulus. Yes, I am aware that the word strikes trembling horror in the hearts of gardeners. But even the dreaded family of bindweed has produced more than one aristocrat, among which I rate *Convolvulus mauritanicus* as a real duchess. Not even its relative, *C. cneorum*, with bright leaves of silver, and white sunshades of flower, is more lovely. Let it have a good warm place, preferably over a big rock or dry wall, and it will wander freely but never rampantly at ground level all summer, from June onwards, a constant mass of delicate mauve trumpets of tenderest silky texture.

A dream of a thing, in my view, and though reputedly not hardy it has, with me, happily survived four winters, to grow in grace each succeeding year. Again, spring seed or autumn cuttings.

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Convolvulus mauritanicus