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FROM MY GARDEN

Playing Against The Rules

H. E. Bates

the well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows



From time to time I find that Mr Roy Hay—well-known horticultural writer—and I have much the same thoughts running through our heads, perhaps because our main purposes in gardening are much the same. Each of us aims to extract as much pleasure from the garden as is possible with the minimum of sweat and labour, which grows more and more disastrously expensive.

I have something else in common with yet another well-known horticulturalist: namely Reginald Farrer, who abhorred the planting of bulbs. It filled him with thunderous depression to put an object into the earth, much as if it were being lowered into its grave, never to be seen again. A plant, a shrub: yes. A bulb, a corm, a tuber—it was as if they were being entombed for ever. The long dark months before the smallest green eyelash of a shoot of crocus, tulip, narcissus, muscari and so on appeared, were altogether too much to bear.

All this, I have in common with Farrer; but I have something else too, namely the reverse process, that of lifting and storing bulbs. This, for my money, is the dreariest task of the gardening year, as it appears also to be for Mr Hay. Not all bulbs, thank Heaven, have to be lifted. The many crocus species I have recommended in this column may be left undisturbed for years and are, at this very moment, scattering about them thousands of little brown-gold pills of seed. Muscari, snowdrops and aconites (which I have recently discovered demand lime in the soil) are happiest left alone. I also have in my garden thousands of daffodils and narcissi which have been prodigiously blooming and increasing for the past 30 years or more in spite of much ill-treatment, the main part of which has consisted of giving them a severe hair-cut, against all the sacred gardening rules, before the foliage has died down. I hate

anyway, those half-brown, half-green shabby knots of daffodil leaves which look like the hastily tied hair of decaying charwomen who've been out on the tiles the night before.

But tulips—tulips are different. They are the bugbear. Each year, for many years, I have planted several thousand of them. Lurking like a dark rat behind the joy of their blossoming has always been the dread of lifting them, the melancholy thought of storing them for the summer. However and whenever I did this the pattern was always the same. You lifted, you stored, you labelled. You chose a dry, cool shelf in the potting shed or a dark, dry one under the greenhouse staging. The results were always disastrous.

Confronted with the mammoth tasks of summer, you forgot your tulips. Then, as if in response to some clarion rodent call, the mice came. Happy fellows, they chewed and chimbled away by night until at last, on a day in August, you took your wretched conscience firmly by the scruff of its lazy neck and said 'It's no use—we must do the bulbs.'

The bulbs, in fact, as you speedily discovered, were already done. The boxes in which you had carefully stored your expensive treasures looked like the sweepings-up of a brown paperchase. Cussing, self-chastisement were useless. Tulipwise, you had had it yet again. On top of all this you had also lost the labels. But gardening is not an exact science. The cure for one thing is death to another. Your neighbour's lordly lilies appear to flourish in exactly the same soil and under the same conditions as your own weedy miscarriages, which look like wet ice-cream cornets left out on the corporation rubbish dump. There are in gardening really no hard-and-fast rules—except, alas, those which, like the mistakes of bad history books, are repeated

ad nauseam from one bad gardening book to another.

There comes a day, then, when either by accident or design, you play against the rules. Two years ago a serious illness left me in a state where all the tulips in the world appeared to me of less importance than a spoonful of chicken broth. Illness tends to magnify little things; it is disposed to throw a merciful veil of forgetfulness over greater ones. For once my tulips were unlifted, forgotten.

The following spring, I peered about my garden with an anxious, sceptical eye. Most of my tulips had been planted, as part of a newly designed area of garden, in batches of 25 and 50. The effect I had hoped to achieve was one of casual, entirely informal grace. At first I detected a few weedy single leaves; then increasing numbers of doubles; and then at last a near miracle. Every variety, with the exception of the green and copper Artist, which should be called Tulip arthritica on account of its odd twists of leaf and stem, had doubled its original number of flowers.

This year the rules have again been broken. Especially successful varieties have been three early flowered Darwin-Fosteriana crosses, Apeldoorn, Purissima and Greenland; that imperial giant Holland's Glory; and many of the most graceful of all tulips, the lily flowered Red Shine, West Point, White Triumphant, Yellow Monarch and Queen of Sheba, the last almost chocolate-red with yellow edging, both long lasting and very early; together with Paul Richter and these all too little grown Rembrandt tulips so often seen in early Dutch paintings.

And so to progress and curses: the one for my Parrot tulips, not yet tried out, the other for mice. And good luck to Mr Hay and his tulips too.

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