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FROM MY GARDEN

The Magic of Seed

H. E. Bates

the well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows



I am no winter gardening man. Not for me the ambition and adventure of climbing the north face of the horticultural Eiger in mid-January. Let sleeping earth lie, is my motto. It is true that I occasionally push my nose outside to drink in the light, delicious winter nectar of *Hamamelis mollis*, surely almost the most bewitching of all winter shrubs, *Viburnum fragrans*, so aptly named, and the lily-of-the-valley sweetness of *Mahonia Bealei*.

But if the earth sleeps, or seems to sleep, my mind doesn't; and every January the Great Itch comes over me—the seductive itch brought about by the magic of seed. I never cease to marvel at this magic which is wrought by four simple ingredients, seed, soil, warmth and water. 'Mucking about with soil', as light and days lengthen, is to me as great a joy as 'messaging about in boats' is to so many other men.

Not that I do all this purely for the joy of it; the harshness of the cost of today's gardening makes it more than ever an economic necessity. Each year, for example, I use some 250 plants of the indispensable *Verbena venosa*. To buy them at half-a-crown a time is a sure way of taking a one-way ticket to Carey Street. One plant of *Helleborus corsicus*, that delicious apple green confection that delights from November until May, costs at least seven-and-sixpence.

A packet of seed, though it will take perhaps nine months to germinate, will give you enough plants for the bold, hefty groups which show off this fine architectural beauty at its best.

But seed-sowing, you say, is a fag; you never have any luck with it; things never come up; you lack a greenhouse; or you have a greenhouse but you lack heat for it. But, I say, in return, seed-sowing is simple; the rules are few and easy. You have no greenhouse; but a soil-heated frame will do just as well instead. When I first began gardening, 40 years ago, such things as soil-heating cables were as remote from our world as jets and nuclear power. In their place I got a modest load of steaming hot horse-manure and in no time my garden-frame was sweltering at 80 deg F. Nowadays I keep my greenhouse at an average winter temperature of 45 deg F, and inside one of them, for the purposes of seed-sowing, use a light soil-heated frame at about 60 deg F.

Thus equipped, your remaining needs are: pans, pots, boxes, compost. I prefer pans, shallow earthenware ones. As for composts—that is, the named formula-ridden sorts—I never use them now. They are outrageously expensive and it is surprising what a good light loam, leavened with a little peat and grit, will do. Nor do I sterilise my soil; for such niceties, I regret to say, I simply haven't the time. Success comes in spite of them. My rules therefore are very simple. First fill the pans with light soil, pressing the soil firm and level with the bottom of any

ordinary, medium-sized garden pot. Then soak the pan and its soil thoroughly (an old washing-up bowl will do to put it in). This necessity for soaking before sowing is the reason I use pans, since you will find the soaking of boxes tediously difficult unless you have a small horse-drinking trough. Once soaked, the pans will need little or no water for some considerable time to come.

All this, like the making of mud pies, is child's play. Snags may begin when the seed itself is sown. There are several sources of failure: to cover seed too deeply or not deeply enough; to drown it completely or allow it to lie in a parched desert; lack of at least a reasonable degree of heat; and above all, impatience. The finest seed, the snufflike dust of begonias, gloxinias, streptocarpus and even petunias, will need no covering of soil at all, though a bottom heat of 65 deg to 70 deg F is essential here. Seeds less fine in substance need to be covered to about their own depth—but see that they *are* covered: a careful snoop a couple of days after sowing will nearly always reveal that some seed is still exposed. For covering the seeds, in former times, I used to steal my wife's sugar sieve. Now she doesn't use one any more and I simply use my own fingers instead. It is surprising how smooth and accurate a job they do.

Now, impatience—don't expect things like begonias, gloxinias, streptocarpus and morning glory to pop up overnight; they will take three weeks or so. Polyanthus and most primulas will take as long, some primulas much longer. Some things, among them trollius, paeony species, hellebores, some primulas and many alpinas, may take as long as a year to germinate. Nor will any amount of heat egg them on to get the business done more quickly. On the contrary, intense cold will alone do the trick. This is a process known as stratification—simply meaning that seeds are left outside all winter to the rigours of frost and snow, after which the return of spring will see to it that the magic of seed isn't necessarily confined to the propagating frame.

Finally, don't always believe what you read on the packet. Last spring I was having lunch with a well-known horticulturist. He was full of a great lamentation: his sweet peas had failed; scarcely a seed had come up.

'And yet,' he said, 'I did everything correctly. Followed all the rules.'

'Including,' I said, 'soaking the seeds overnight?'

'Of course. Of course.'

'You should have known better,' was all I had to say.

Therefore, as I say, don't always slavishly follow what it says on the packet; follow the few simple rules given above and don't believe all you hear about green fingers; and *don't* soak your sweet-pea seeds overnight.

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