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## FROM MY GARDEN

# A Man's Best Friend

### H. E. Bates

the well-known novelist writes about how his garden grows



If I say that the nearest the average housewife will get to an orchid will be putting a vanilla pod in her coffee beans I shall not be offering you a conundrum, but a household hint and a piece of botanical information at the same time. For vanilla (*Vanilla planifolia*) is also an orchid and it is a common and useful practice in some parts of the world to keep a vanilla pod in the kitchen tin of coffee beans or grounds, thus giving the coffee a special and subtle flavour.

I am prompted to write of orchids because a friend of mine, knowing little more of horticulture, still less of the commercial business of flowers, than that grass is predominantly green and violets blue, confided to me the other day that he thought 'of going into the orchid business'. When I inquired what kind of orchid business he replied, not surprisingly, 'Oh! Just orchids. They fetch an awful price, don't they?'

I assured him that they did fetch an awful price, that is if you went into a shop and bought one for your girlfriend, and that they cost an awful lot too. I also informed him that orchids form a vast family, covering every continent except the Polar regions. Out of all these thousands of species which, I inquired, had he in mind? He at first confessed he didn't know, and then said, 'Oh! I suppose those big purple-violet ones. You know.'

'Bosom orchids,' I said and he said yes. 'They're out,' I said. 'What, bosoms?'

'Not bosoms,' I said. They, thank heaven, were always with us and I hoped long would be. No, it was the big exotic cattleyas that were out, at least in this country, where their size and a certain overpowering element in shape and colour are out of fashion as being slightly too opulent and flamboyant for good taste. In America they still remain, for all I know, status symbols that are the sisters of mink and sable, well fitted for the adornment of ostentatious millionairess bosoms: hence my name for them.

Cattleyas are commercially 'out' for another reason; they require heat and are expensive to grow. Then what about those delicious spidery branches in pinky-gold that you see in West End shops, or those lovely things that look like regal pansies, or those beautiful lady-slipper things? These, surely, were not too ostentatious for English taste? I had to admit that they were not, but still they too were not really commercial propositions.

What then, my friend inquired, could he 'go in for'? It was now necessary to give my friend some firm and sensible advice. Out of all the many thousands of orchids with which the world is enriched there was perhaps only one, I told him, with which he should attempt any sort of commercial venture: cymbidiums. These are the orchids, in long arching sprays of ten or a dozen blooms in shades of delicate pink, cream, raspberry

red, jade green, soft browns and golds, white and yellow, that you see most often in shops.

Moreover, cymbidiums are not difficult to grow; they require little heat (one famous orchid nursery sometimes lets its winter temperature down to as low as 35 deg); they can be left for long periods without water; and generally speaking they flower in winter, roughly from December to the end of March.

But wait. Just as there are horses and horses, so there are orchids and orchids. There are horses which by means of four legs merely transport bags of bones, hide, liver and lights from one place to another; and there are horses which win Derbys and Gold Cups. So with cymbidiums; it is all a question of pedigree. The expert eye will judge an orchid as meticulously as the race-horse owner will judge a prospective winner at Newmarket. In other words, any old thing won't do.

If therefore, like my friend, your thoughts should turn to cymbidiums, either for your personal pleasure or as a sideline for a little profit, think hard on these things: *don't* buy cheap bargain lots; *don't* buy, at great expense, anything without seeing it in flower; *don't* expect to order by catalogue. Don't, on the other hand, be depressed if you should admire an orchid at Chelsea, only to be told, if it were for sale, it would cost you £600. Unflowered seedlings may be bought for as little as £1 5s and in a year may produce something worth ten times the original cost.

The rules are in consequence simple. Go to a good cymbidium nursery when the orchids are in flower. Almost all the best and most celebrated cymbidium nurseries are in the south of England; my experience is that they are largely run by people proud and delighted to show their wares in every stage from the tiny grass-like seedlings that are floated out of their propagating jars for the next stage of growth, to the glory of many-spiked plants in full flower (remember it takes up to seven years for a plant to flower from seed, no matter what the climate). By so looking at plants in flower you will be able to see what a modern cymbidium really is; not a creature thin and straggly of petal or washy in colour, but broad and thick and pure as marble, with colour of lip and petals sharply but delicately defined. As to the expense (and there is no denying that on the face of it good plants originally seem expensive to buy) remember that orchids resemble horses in another way: of all the thousands of seedlings that result from the crossing of two parents, however excellent, only a mere handful will turn out to be anything more than floral hacks.

Remember, then, that whether you are growing for Covent Garden or for your own personal pleasure, there is nothing like the best. As for the ethereal—well, what's too good for a girl? Aren't orchids a man's best friend?

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