

Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and
Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1970.

From my Garden by H. E. Bates

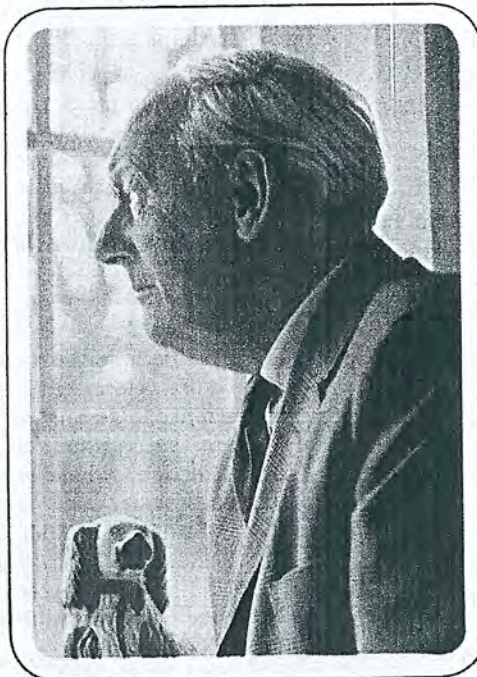
I suppose no word strikes more dread into the hearts of gardeners than convolvulus, a plant that to most of them means that uncivilised serpent, the bindweed, that twists and twines its menacing invasion into summer beds and borders. Classically and mockingly lovely though its pure white trumpets may look as they climb among the bryony and blackberry flower of July and August along every hedge-row, the average gardener regards them as more deadly than deadly nightshade as soon as they insinuate themselves inside his garden gate. Not surprisingly, therefore, the genus is much shunned and despised. And as a result its infinite beauties remain for the most part little known, which is a very great pity. It is undeniable that when convolvulus are bad, they are, like little boys, horrid; but when they are good they are angelic. Let me therefore proceed to pat a few of these angels deservedly on the head.

In almost all Dutch flower painting of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even later, you will rarely fail to find that sparkling little annual gem, *Convolvulus minor*, sometimes also called *Convolvulus tricolor* on account of its having an outer rim of royal blue, an inner circle of white and a heart of pure yellow. That it has been known and loved for centuries is not a little bit surprising; that it appears to be little grown today certainly is. It is a ravishing thing, glorying in poor soil and much sun, a brilliant coverer of the ground and altogether as easy to grow as mustard-and-cress.

As I dislike sowing annuals in the open ground, always fearful that some hidden predator will creep in during the night and make off by morning with either seeds or seedlings, I raised my plants for 1969 in a cool greenhouse, pricked them off into small paper pots and popped them out in open ground at the beginning of May. For another five months they continued to put on a bejewelled array of such enchantment that I believe that if visitors to the garden had had to award a prize for the greatest beauty in the summer of great beauties, *Convolvulus minor* would have received it, rising to the status of *major*.

It couldn't do this, of course, because there already is a *Convolvulus major*, which is the blue Morning Glory that, with its celestial pure blue

The well-known novelist talks to you about how his garden grows



Recalcitrant Beauties

trumpets is without doubt the best known and most widely loved of all the genus. That many people fail with it in this country is entirely due to the fact that it is planted out too early, before cold nights have left us. Never forget that it belongs to the category of 'some like it hot'.

When I wrote once before in this column of *Convolvulus mauritanicus* I was mortified to learn that some readers had mistakenly supposed that this incomparable little jewel had been confused, because its flowers are also of purest blue, with Morning Glory. Let me at once make clear therefore that the two are entirely different, though equally seductive. Whereas Morning Glory climbs, *Convolvulus mauritanicus* trails. In a really good summer, such as 1969, it will go happily mad, asking for nothing more than a spot in full sun, where its glorious silken trumpets of pale blue will grace ground, rock or path (and even tub or vase, I suppose) for months and months. Since it comes from Mauritania, in the sizzling latitudes of North Africa, it is reckoned as being not quite hardy here, which

is contrary to my own experience. My original plant has now survived six winters and has given unlimited progeny. This, I think, is because the plant it *not* cut down in autumn, thus ensuring that the summer's dead stalks will protect its roots in winter. It is a little difficult to propagate, largely because every possible cutting is always bearing a flower, but a batch of early summer cuttings is, I find, the answer to the problem.

Convolvulus cneorum, from Spain, I have also written about before. Of shining silver leaf, with white-pink trumpets, it is also a jewel. And, I am sad to relate, a slightly fickle one and for no apparent reason at all. Given a Spanish summer, it grew to perfection, never looked anything but very healthy, then dropped every flower bud it made. Ah well—you can't have everything all the time. *Convolvulus cneorum* is also not easy to propagate, I find, and much patience is needed, though it will be rewarded at last.

Convolvulus cantabrica, also from Spain, has pink flowers and a silvery foliage. But hardly less beautiful, in my view, is our own native *Convolvulus*, now known as *Calystegia soldanella*. This inhabits our southern seacoast shingles where it is at its loveliest in August. Do not attack it with bucket and spade and steal away with it as a treasure for your own inland plot. It will *not* like your garden in Mitcham or Manchester. Let it remain starved on its salty dune and shingle, looking not unlike a pink sea anemone washed up from a pool and left to dry itself out in the sun.

Convolvulus althaeoides is a villain and has been bitterly reviled. It deserves it. Plant it at your peril. In fact, *don't* plant it ever. What first bewitches you by way of large trumpets of pink will end by driving you to despairing madness. I once had the misfortune to plant it over my rock garden. In less than two years it had taken possession. The entire rock garden had to be dismantled before the last shred of cancer could be cut out.

I hope, in conclusion, that Roy Elliott, alpine expert and editor of the Alpine Garden Society's excellent bulletin, will forgive me for borrowing this article's title from him: 'those recalcitrant lovelies', is his own description for convolvulus, 'who offer you jam yesterday, jam tomorrow, but never unstintingly jam today.'

© Evensford Productions Ltd, 1970