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From My Garden by H.E. Bates

One of our favourite novelists tells us how his garden grows

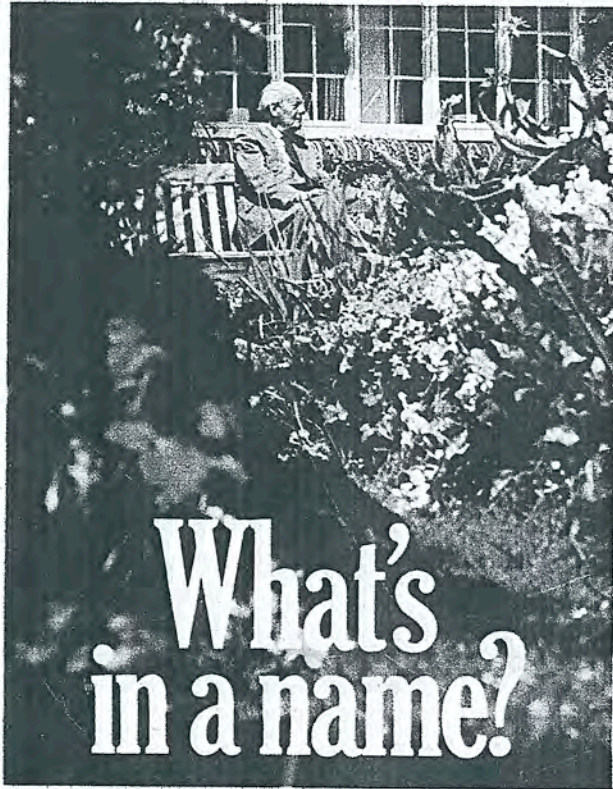
It is many years since a rather snobby lady of my acquaintance recoiled at my use of a good Latin name for a particular flower, tossed her head and said to her husband, as if they both belonged to some secret and superior religious sect, 'Oh! But we prefer the common English names, don't we, dear?'

Now it must be admitted that we in England have enshrined many of our most-loved flowers with names that, though common, have about them the very breath of poetry. Primrose, bluebell, sunflower, meadow sweet, marigold, cranesbill, pimpernel, cornflower, creeping Jenny, corn cockle, columbine, coltsfoot: the list weaves like an endless silken thread through the language. English names indeed, for English flowers—splendid, except where English fails us, as it quite naturally and very often does. It was Ruskin, in the last century, who, prompted by a mania for 'common' names, succeeded in introducing a host of pretentious artificialities that merely defeated the very purpose that he had set out to achieve.

Campanula (most beautiful of names) was not, he decided, acceptable; he substituted 'bellflower' instead. He dismissed saxifrage and decided that 'rockfoil' was to be preferred. He didn't like arabis and settled for the hideous 'rock cress'. He weaved a whole host of other fancies, most of which, thankfully, have long since gone with the wind.

The plan for anglicizing plant names could, of course, never succeed. What English substitute do we have for crocus? For soldanella, gentian, daphne, datura, hydrangea, magnolia, begonia, gloxinia, streptocarpus and a crowd of others? For many we have English, Greek and Latin names, equally loved. Who shall say which is lovelier—aquilegia or columbine, mimulus or musk, viola or pansy, delphinium or larkspur, salvia or sage? Beautiful though the long-loved English names can be, those of classical origin still roll from the tongue with velvet sweetness. Anemone, nemophila, anemone, veronica, scilla, verbascum, viburnum, bignonia, catalpa, convolvulus—what more musical chorus?

Ruskin is dead. The compilers of catalogues, however, are still with us, still ready to out-Ruskin Ruskin. I observe that bellflower isn't bad enough for one of them; he comes up with 'bellworts', which sounds like a name for pig-food. Most of them still persist with 'blanket flower', a name of unparalleled stodginess if ever there was one, for gailardia. Schizanthus is called 'the poor man's orchid', though goodness knows why, since it has about as much resemblance to a true orchid as a dandelion has to a chrysanthemum. And what in Heaven's name has *Limnathes Douglasii* done to deserve that stupid label, 'poached egg flower'? Or 'fried eggs', as one catalogue has it? And can



'rock jasmine' really be held to be any improvement on the classical elegance of androsace?

But from time to time, of course, the boot is on the other foot. Botanists can be thick-headed too. Names 'excogitated arduously in a library by the enthusiasm of erudition' sounds like a line from Gilbert and Sullivan but is in fact Reginald Farrer's way of poking fun at the pundits who labour year in, year out, to confer on plants names botanically accurate but at the same time aesthetically repulsive. Scholarly no doubt, but tedious beyond dispute, they change plant names more often than a chameleon his colours, maddening us all as they do so.

There used to be a group of plants called gesneria, a pleasant enough name until the pundits got to work. It is now Smithiantha, which sounds like a paint-remover. Over the years we got used to japonica, which wasn't logical, of course, and eventually we accepted cydonia instead.

Now that we have just got used to that, the pundits decree that we shall be saddled with chaenomeles, which half of us can't pronounce anyway.

I am prompted to wonder where the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 puts the nurseryman in all this. Will he be liable for prosecution for offering 'a poached egg plant' that has no egg in it, poached or otherwise? For falsely pretending that schizanthus is an orchid for the poor? Or offering *Arbutus Unedo rubra* as the 'strawberry tree', well knowing that it bears no strawberries? Will he be held guilty of both deceit and irreverence for calling epimedium 'bishop's hat'? For offering a castor oil plant that contains no castor oil, a soapwort that contains no soap, a Venus navel-wort that doesn't show the appropriate midriff?

If, on the other hand, it does something to put an end to a certain species of gimmickry that has been in recent use by a type of nurseryman less interested in accuracy than quick kudos it will be something to be thankful for. When a friend proudly announced some time ago she was growing something with a wildly exotic name, for which she had paid two shillings a plant, I was aroused, and rightly, to suspicion. She had merely been sold our old friend mesembryanthemum, which she could have grown by the hundred from a shilling packet of seeds.

Thankfully I saved her from an extravaganza of oriental names that might have been picked out of *A Thousand and One Nights*.

Personally I shall press on with what little Latin I have and try to make my less Greek a little more. The classical names of plants, if not always more beautiful, can at least be exact.

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