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The garden as theatre

THE SUNDAY TIMES GARDENING BOOK/by Lanning Roper
Nelson 63s

By H E Bates

"I AM strongly of the opinion that the possession of a quantity of plants, however good the plants may be themselves and however ample their number, does not make a garden. . . . It is just in the way it is done that lies the whole difference between commonplace gardening and gardening that may rightly claim to rank as a fine art."

The words are not those of Mr Lanning Roper, but of Gertrude Jekyll. Though written sixty years ago, they nevertheless might well have formed the text on which the epicurean but wholly practical Sunday Times Gardening Book was written.

It is, of course, Mr Roper's great good fortune that he lives and gardens in a world excitingly and almost embarrassingly rich in plants, remarkable not only for flowers but foliage, that Miss Jekyll never knew. This alone would make his sumptuous but not expensive book a cornucopia of stimulating inspiration, but he himself is also a professional and supremely practical gardener, revelling not merely in rare and ravishing delights, but also in long-loved common things, such as nasturtiums and London Pride, clearly believing, again with Miss Jekyll, that "nothing is 'common' in the sense of base or unworthy if it is rightly used."

This, then, is a gardening book very much after my own heart, so packed with good things, both inspiring and practical, that I defy any gardener with a grain of ambition in his heart not to raise his game by several degrees after reading it. On almost every page I find myself looking at, or reading about, some plant I have long known and loved, another I have recently planted and cannot wait to see in flower, or some other treasure I am determined to have as soon as I can raise the cash. Among his many interests (he covers the entire range of alpine, shrubs, roses, lilies, climbers, plants tender and exotic), he is a great lover of bold, architectural and contrasting foliage: *bergenias* (at long last the pundits seem to have settled this excellent plant's name; after messing about for years with half a dozen versions), *hostas*, *eryngiums* (there is a new striking beauty called *Donard* Variety, which Mr Roper doesn't mention), *mahonias*, *acanthus*,

euphorbias, the silver and golden *eleagnus*, that chaste green-flowered winter aristocrat *Helleborus argentifolius*, and the increasing company of silver-leaved ghosts. His love of green flowers extends also to tulips, where I find him commending three great favourites of mine, the green Artist and Greenland and that choicest of Fosteriana-Darwin crosses *Purissima*, which appears to be pure white until you see it against snow, when it becomes a subtle tender cream.

He also writes sensibly about vegetables, believing, as I do, that the day of long rows of carrots, onions, parsnips, beet and squalid areas of brussels sprouts for pigeons to eat, is

over. With rising costs of labour the aim must surely be, as he says, to grow only the epicurean things that are expensive to buy. The future, in fact, must surely lie in less labour, more beauty, more ground cover (Mr Roper is a great anti-bare-earth man), more permanent plantings, thus making the garden not a burden but a sort of open-air theatre in which you are no longer a slave to hoe and spade but a spectator blessed with increasing leisure and pleasure.

The gardener, in fact, must dominate the garden and not the garden the gardener. Of course, there must always be work and much hard thought to achieve a standard that satisfies; but I nevertheless believe that this book shows the way to a garden world richer, more exciting and less oppressive than it used to be. Buy it, therefore, and if you can't buy it (it isn't, as I say, expensive for so ravishing a feast) steal it. It is far too good to miss.

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