

Garden writing – contributions from HPS members

In the spring 2021 issue of the *Journal*, I asked members to send in their favourite pieces of garden writing. Thank you very much to those who contributed something. The pieces of writing included below are an eclectic mix, somewhat constrained by copyright laws, and insufficient time to get the required permissions for those that are still under copyright. Regrettably, there were several excellent contributions I was unable to use, for this reason.

The images accompanying the text are indicative, rather than relating directly to the words.

Many, but not all, of the authors chosen by our contributors are widely known. The writing styles vary from reverential to didactic, poetic, whimsical and laconic. The subject matter can be broadly divided into the following categories:

- Flowers and gardens;
- Cultivation: practices and thoughts of all sorts;
- Nature: glorious, and at times less so.

Please do continue to send me your favourite garden-related poetry or prose – I will always try to include a piece or two.

Flowers and gardens

' To Miss Barnett, Torquay

Three Mile Cross, 28 June 1841

First, my beloved friend, let me answer your most kind enquiries. I am greatly better. It has been a most remarkable escape; but a real escape. I cannot yet turn in my bed ...

Ever since this misfortune, Ben having said that half the parish had mounted on a hayrick close by to look at the garden, which lies beneath it (an acre of flowers rich in colour as a painter's palette), I could not resist the sight of the ladder, and one evening when all the men were away, climbed up to take myself a view of my flowery domain.

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Fig. 1 Waterperry Gardens mixed border

I wish you could see it! Masses of the Siberian larkspur, and sweet Williams, mostly double, the still brighter new larkspur (*Delphinium chinensis*), rich as an oriental butterfly – such a size and such a blue! Amongst roses in millions, with the blue and white Canterbury bells (also double), and the white foxglove, and the variegated monkshood, the carmine pea, in its stalwart beauty, the nemophila, like the sky above its head, the new chrysanthemum, with its gay orange tufts, hundreds of lesser annuals, the fuchsias, zinnias, salvias, geraniums past compt; so bright are the flowers that the green really does not predominate amongst them!

Excerpts from *The Maligning of Magenta* by George R. Kingbourne, originally printed in the *HPS Bulletin*, 1977, Vol 5, No 3

‘... all HPS members will know that it describes the typical hue of the mallows, the cranesbill geraniums, herbaceous phloxes, some lychnis and peony species, and that of very many other herbaceous plants. Many shrubs and annual and biennial plants also share this honourable colour.

I stress this honourable, approving, aspect particularly because later this colour was to have for certain English gardeners a distasteful quality. My researches seem to point to two very eminent gardeners as the chief source of this prejudice – Reginald Farrer and Augustus Bowles.

These two men were close friends who had made plant hunting expeditions together in the Alps. Both had written important scholarly books on plants and gardening. The gardening world, in fact, ‘hung on their words’.

Earlier the Victorians had been conditioned to revere the judgement of such men as Ruskin and Carlyle who pontificated loftily on all matters. I think this attitude persisted later among the gardening fraternity who wished to be told definitely what they should like, and what to reject as persons of good taste.

...Bowles writes of *Geranium psilostemon*: ‘An awful form of original sin’ ... Of the related *Geranium sanguineum*, bloody cranesbill, Farrer says: ‘It has too fiery a terribleness’, and Bowles calls it ‘vicious crimson’.

... *Lychnis coronaria* also comes in for some rough handling from Farrer who declares: ‘It sickens the mind’s eye.’

... Bowles and Farrer then join forces to trample upon another relation of the battered geranium family – *Erodium manescavii*. Farrer writes: ‘It is a large coarse rankness universally known in gardens, with flowers of a heavy flaring magenta-rose.’ Bowles writes: ‘The flowers are sinfully near magenta.’



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Fig. 2 Unnamed liliium which could be called magenta



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Fig. 3 *Lychnis coronaria*



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Fig. 4 *Erodium manescavii*

One effect of the 'character assassination' of magenta has been that nurserymen and seedsmen generally avoid the word, substituting: purple-red, rosy red, crimson, carmine, cerise, etc.

It would be wrong of me to suggest that all those who have written on plants and colour have denigrated magenta. The adjectives Tyrian, imperial, royal and handsome have been used by other writers with stronger nerves and more temperate language. If within the HPS anyone wants to form a 'Friends of Magenta' group I will join, and then there will be two of us at least.'

Cultivation

Excerpts from *The Glory of the Garden*, by Rudyard Kipling

'... And there you'll see the gardeners, the men and
'prentice boys
Told off to do as they are bid and do it without noise;
For, except when seeds are planted and we shout to scare
the birds,
The Glory of the Garden it abideth not in words.

And some can pot begonias and some can bud a rose,
And some are hardly fit to trust with anything that grows;

But they can roll and trim the lawns and sift the sand
and loam,
For the Glory of the Garden occupieth all who come.

Our England is a garden, and such gardens are not
made
By singing: "Oh, how beautiful", and sitting in the shade
While better men than we go out and start their
working lives
At grubbing weeds from gravel-paths with broken
dinner-knives.

There's not a pair of legs so thin, there's not a head
so thick,
There's not a hand so weak and white, nor yet a heart so
sick
But it can find some needful job that's crying to be done,
For the Glory of the Garden glorifieth every one.

Then seek your job with thankfulness and work till
further orders,
If it's only netting strawberries or killing slugs on borders;
And when your back stops aching and your hands begin
to harden,
You will find yourself a partner In the Glory of the Garden.'



Fig. 5 Helmsley Walled Gardens herbaceous borders

From Mrs Helena Rutherford Ely, 1903

‘The watering of a garden requires nearly as much judgement as the seasoning of a soup. Keep the soil well stirred and loose on the surface, going through the garden, where possible, with a rake; stir gently with a trowel every five days or once a week. In this way moisture will be retained in the soil, since the loose earth acts as a mulch.

When watering, be generous. Soak the plants to the roots; wet all the earth around them, and do it late in the afternoon, when the sun is low. How often have I been obliged to chide the men for watering too early in the afternoon, and not doing it thoroughly, for, upon stirring the ground, I would find that the water had penetrated but a couple of inches. During long periods of dry weather, the garden, without water, will simply wither and burn.’

From *Villette*, by Charlotte Brontë, 1853

‘M. Emanuel had a taste for gardening; he liked to tend and foster plants. I used to think that working amongst shrubs with a spade or watering pot soothed his nerves; it was recreation to which he often had recourse; and now he looked to the orange trees, the geraniums, the gorgeous cactuses, and revived them all with refreshment their drought needed. His lips meantime sustained his precious cigar, that (for him) first necessary and prime luxury of life; its blue wreaths curled prettily enough amongst the flowers, and in the evening light.’

From ‘*My Rock-Garden*’ by Reginald Farrer (1880-1920)

‘Few things are more annoying than dogmatism; and dogmatism is nowhere more misplaced than in horticulture. The wise gardener is one whom years of experience have succeeded in teaching that plants have perverse individualities of their own, and that, though general rules may be laid down, yet it is impossible ever to predict with any certainty that any given treatment is bound to secure success or failure. There are so many possibilities to be reckoned with, so many differences of soil, climate, and aspect. Then, when you have allowed for all these, remains the great stumping fact, that out of one seed-pod no two plants (any more than any two babies of a family) have precisely the same constitution or the same idiosyncrasies, so what spells happiness for one

may be misery to its brother. Even before grappling with this problem, the gardener is sternly confronted by the truth that what suits in Surrey is death in Westmorland; that what serves in Yorkshire loam is fatal in Suffolk sand; that what sunny Sussex favours, Cumberland’s rainfall makes deadly – that, to sum up the huge uncertainties of gardening in one perspicuous instance, *Lilium candidum* will be a gorgeous weed in one cottage garden, and a blank rotten failure in another, divided only by a hedge, and identical in soil, culture and aspect.’



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Figs 6 & 7 Success and failure with *Lilium candidum*

Nature

From *Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers*, by John Ruskin, (1875)

'I have in my hand a small red poppy which I gathered on Whit Sunday on the Palace of the Caesars. It is an intensely simple, intensely floral, flower. All silk and flame: a scarlet cup, perfect-edged all round, seen among the wild grass far away, like a burning coal fallen from heaven's altars. You cannot have a more complete, a more stainless, type of flower absolute; inside and outside, all flower. No sparing of colour anywhere – no outside coarseness – no interior secrecies; open as the sunshine that creates it; fine-finished on both sides, down to the extremest point of insertion on its narrow stalk; and robed in the purple of the Caesars . . .

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Fig. 8 *Papaver rhoeas* growing among barley

We usually think of a poppy as a coarse flower; but it is the most transparent and delicate of all the blossoms of the field. The rest – nearly all of them – depend on the texture of their surfaces for colour. But the poppy is painted glass; it never glows so brightly as when the sun shines through it. Wherever it is seen – against the light or with the light – always, it is a flame, and warms the wind like a blown ruby.'

The Senses of Nature, by Penelope Hellyer, 2017. From her collection of poems entitled *Where My Heart Is*

Earthy aromas rise when the spade turns the soil,
Crumbled beneath your hands, friable and lush,
Or squeezed, emits the stagnant stench of grey clay.

Which sense does the robin use, smell, sight or sound
To capture the minute life that we cannot detect?

Listen to the sound of spade or fork in gravelly ground,
The squelch of the foot on sodden earth.

Inhale the bitter and musky odours of autumn fungi,
Feel the texture of composting leaves
Note the microscopic beings - all working for nature.

Listen to the soft murmuring of humming bees,
The shuffling and chattering of birds,
The gentle whisper of leaves fluttering
Like butterflies to the ground.

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Fig. 9 Fly agaric, *Amanita muscaria*

And finally, the verdict on this year's difficult growing season...

Rain, by anonymous, on a postcard published by the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority 🌧️

