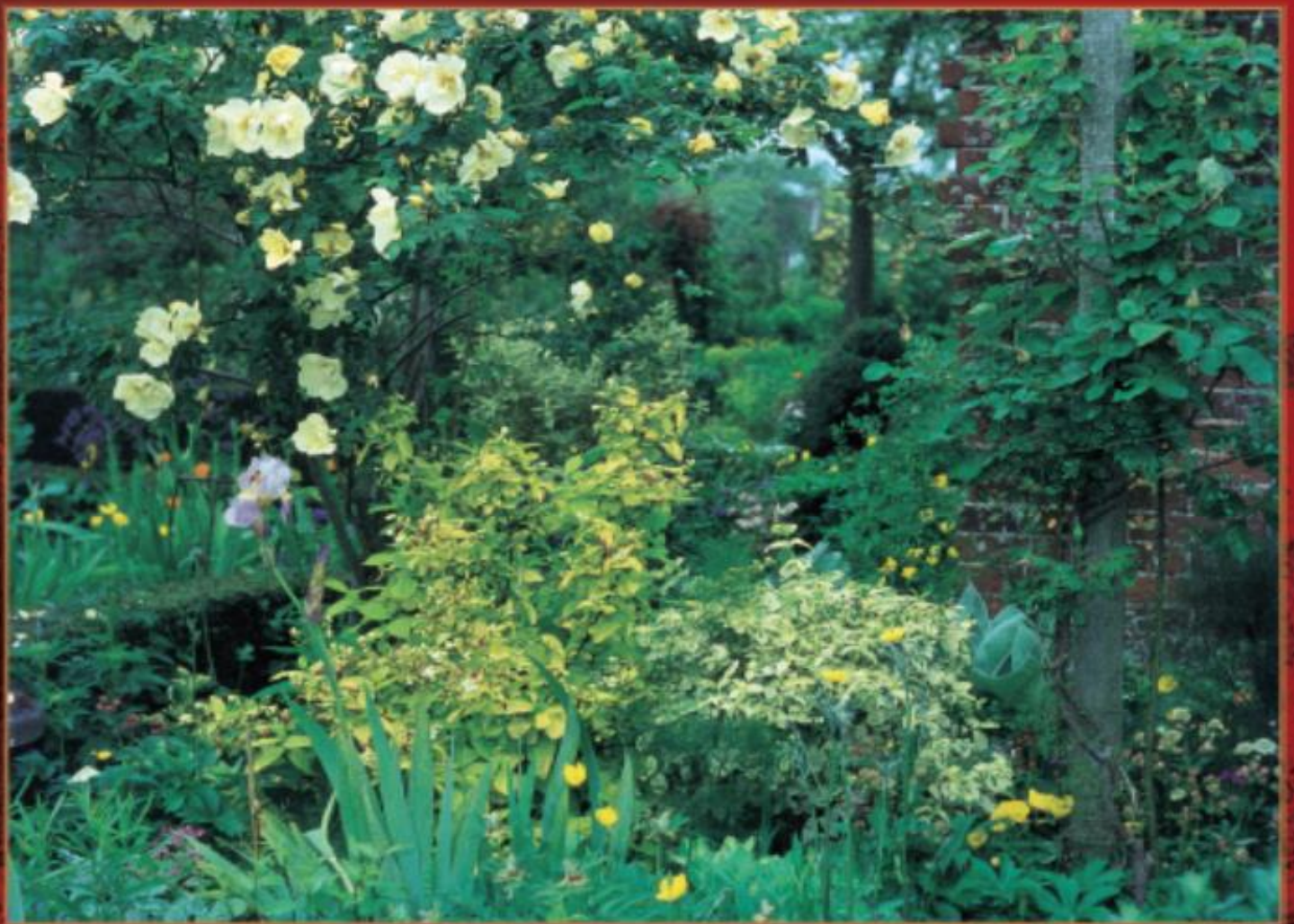
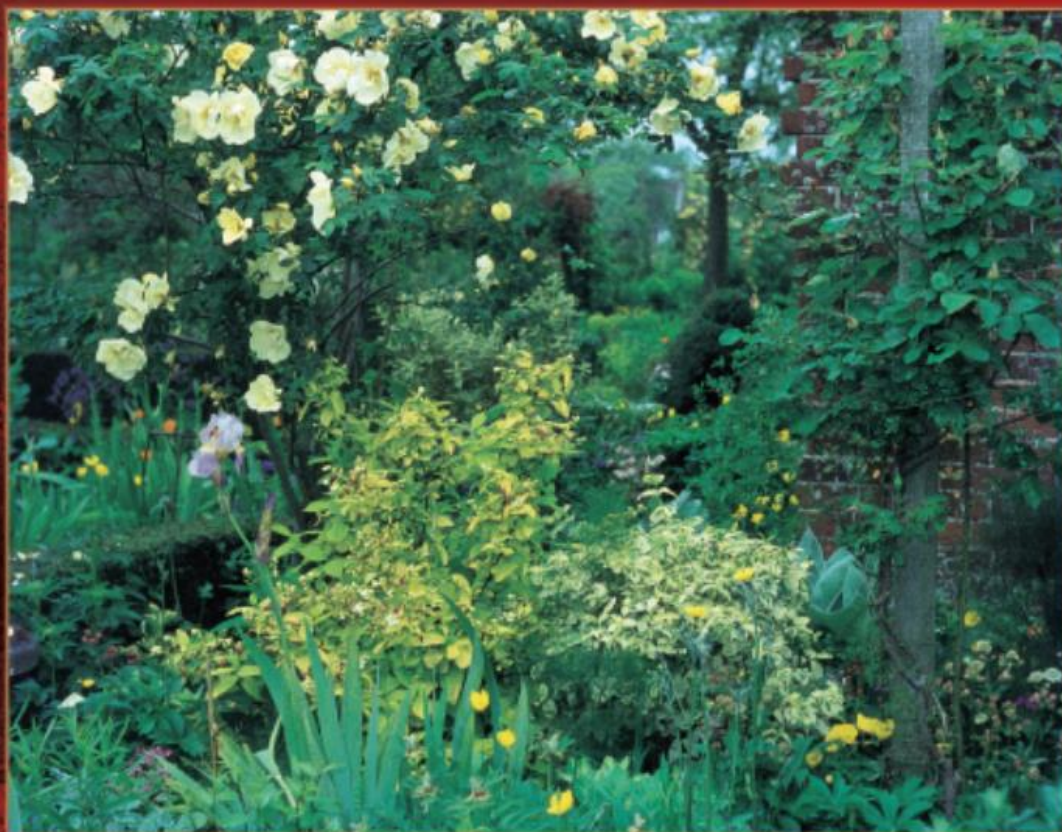


COTTAGE GARDEN FLOWERS




MARGERY FISH
FOREWORD BY GRAHAM RICE

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MARGERY FISH

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Plant-Name Changes

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Foreword

Many of us garden the way we do largely because of Margery Fish. Her disagreement with her husband Walter over the style of gardening at their home at East Lambrook Manor in Somerset reflected the divergence of views amongst gardeners generally: Walter liked dahlias, he liked big bawdy dahlias; he liked them in rows and he liked them amongst his wife's more subtle plantings.

Margery acquiesced, for his sake, but her heart was never in it and each spring there were fewer tubers to replant as they rotted in storage.

Walter Fish represented the past, Margery represented a more distant past transformed into the future. After his death Margery pursued her own vision of a modern, more imaginative form of cottage gardening, using the plants of the past and the dahlias were forgotten – except inasmuch as they sparked memories of her husband.

In her original introduction to Cottage Garden Flowers forty years ago, Margery Fish resigns herself to the gradual disappearance of the small cottage gardens around her but encourages us to grow and preserve the plants that were so characteristic of them, as she did herself.

She lovingly describes the huge number of these delightful plants that she grew, and enlightens us as to their qualities and quirks. As a result of her popularising these fascinating and often demure plants, and the work of the National Council for the Preservation of Plants and Gardens and of the Cottage Garden Society, many have survived and some are far more widely grown than they have ever been.

But, sadly, many of the plants Margery re-discovered and grew so tenderly have gone – most of the primroses and double daisies she discusses here are now only with us in her words; virus diseases and vine weevil having seen them off.

Margery Fish's imaginative adaptation of the traditional cottage-garden style that she saw disappearing around her – bringing old-fashioned plants together with contemporary plants in the same style – has dramatically influenced the way we garden now. Today's mixed borders are a direct descendant of the style Margery Fish created at East Lambrook Manor. In this book her love of these plants from the past, which gave traditional cottage gardens their special aura, shines out. It is largely because of her devotion and her enthusiasm for these treasures that we grow so many today.

*Graham Rice,
2001*

Introduction

Nowhere in the world is there anything quite like the English cottage garden. In every village and hamlet in the land there were these little gardens, always gay and never garish, and so obviously loved. There are not so many now, alas, as those cottages of cob or brick, with their thatched roofs and tiny crooked windows, are disappearing to make way for council houses and modern bungalows, but the flowers remain, flowers that have come to be known as 'cottage flowers' because of their simple, steadfast qualities.

The gardens themselves were usually small, sometimes only a slip between the cottage and the road, with a tiny patch behind. They were tidy without being prim and were always packed with flowers.

No definite design went to their planting and the treasured flowers were put wherever there was room. There might be a myrtle, grown from a sprig from grandmother's wedding bouquet, pinks from coveted slips, rosemary and 'lad's love', the great red peonies that last so well, and crown imperials grown in a row. Wallflowers and snapdragons grew in the walls, and cheerful red and pink daisies played hide-and-seek between the shells that edged the path.

Plants are friendly creatures and enjoy each other's company. The close-packed plants in a cottage garden grow well and look happy. They have the shelter of the wall or hedge that screens them from the road, and the comfortable backing of cabbages and leeks. Pansies and forget-me-nots flower under the currant bushes, nasturtiums frolic among the carrots, and old apple trees give welcome shade.

I am afraid the cottages and their little gardens may disappear completely as the years go by and we shall have to remember them by the flowers. The treasures that made those little gardens so irresistible for so many years must have toughness and

determination as well as artless beauty. Great efforts are being made to preserve our old buildings, and we must also cherish the simple flowers that brightened our cottage gardens for so many years.

~ 1 ~

Spring Flowers

The flowers of spring open early in a cottage garden. They have been sheltered all through the winter with walls or hedges, and they get more protection from the plants growing near them.

Aconites and snowdrops will be peeping through in January. Sometimes there is grass outside the cottage gate or it may be on the other side of the road. Snowdrops will sow themselves in grass wherever they can and it is quite usual to see them growing happily in a grass bank opposite a cottage or peopling the rough grass verges along the road. Life in the road is dangerous with cattle passing regularly, and many a plodding foot must descend on those innocent heads, but it does not deter them. Up they come, year after year, with more every season, little white buds between spears of green. I always think they are holding up green hands to clasp the fragile buds and protect them as they push through the soil. Aconites sow themselves too, but not quite so regularly or generously.

Symphytum grandiflorum is not a spectacular plant but the foliage is evergreen and the little hanging flowers in cream, tipped with orange, flower in January. Its old name is 'Cherubin and Seraphim' and it is sensible to flower so early because we should not pay much attention to it later on. The foliage is at its best early in the year too. Always rough and dark, it gets rather coarse by the end of the summer but it does not show much in the dark corners in which it likes to grow.*

Violets have been blooming from November but they flower in earnest from February onwards, and there will be little orange crocuses springing up in odd corners.

Omphalodes verna is really an April flowerer but it usually cannot wait till then. I often see a little blue eye looking up at me in really wintry February weather when all good children should be

asleep. There is more than a suggestion of pink about these early flowers and when they come to their official opening, they are the bluest of the blue. In fact 'Blue-Eyed Mary' is the name they go by. This is said to have been Marie Antoinette's favourite flower and I believe it grew wild in the woods near Schönnbrunn in Austria. Although its flowers are so lovely and contrast so well with the pointed hairy leaves, it is rather untidy in its growth. It makes long stems with the little rosettes of leaves and flowers at the end of them, and a few tattered brown leaves on the way. It really needs to be grown in a mass to be effective but in a cottage garden the other plants conceal the ugly bare stems and we enjoy the little blue flowers tumbling among the herbage.

There are other omphalodes; *O. cappadocica* rejoices in the name of 'Blue-Eyed Betty'. It is much neater in growth and makes a good clump of very elegant, smooth, pointed leaves, above which we have those dainty sprays of such very blue flowers. Why is it, I wonder, that blue flowers give such a feeling of innocence and simplicity? In a small garden this omphalodes takes up very little room. It can be wedged at the side of a path or planted to hang over a wall. It is much easier to propagate than *O. verna*, because the clumps can be broken into many fragments, each with a good crop of fine roots. I do not know if there is a white form of *O. cappadocica*. I have never seen one, but I have a white *Omphalodes verna* and it is very lovely.

Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum multiflorum major**) is a favourite cottage plant which has enjoyed a real come back. I think we have the flower arrangers to thank for this (but I wish they would not take off the leaves as they do for some of their arrangements) and also the changing taste of many gardeners. Instead of planning our gardens for a riot of colour we seek satisfaction in textures, neutral shades and green in every tone. The hanging green-tipped bells of Solomon's seal, with spreading leaves above, are grace personified. To see them at their best I think they should be planted at the top of a bank—something it would be difficult to do in a tiny cottage garden, but they can arch from the corner of a bed. There seem to be two distinct forms of this plant, the one most usually

grown, which is about three feet high, and another which is about a foot. For the connoisseur there is a double-flowered form, which, quite honestly, is not so beautiful as that with single flowers; then there is *P. oppositifolium* with rather smaller flowers and two tiny ones, *P. falcatum* a few inches high in white, and *P. hookeri*, pink. The Solomon's Seal with variegated leaves is very rare but most exciting when you find it.

There must be some Biblical association with this plant because it is also called 'David's harp' as well as 'Lady's seal'. Not only is it beautiful in flower but afterwards there are lovely berries. At first they are green and very decorative, and then they turn black, with a bloom of blue. When ripe they are as big as ivy berries and, according to old writers, have a very sweet and pleasant taste—but I have not had the courage to put this to the test. At one time the roots of Solomon's seal were recommended as a cure for bruises.

Early in the century crown imperials (*Fritillaria imperialis*) were grown in many gardens. I know we had them in the first garden I can remember and it was not in any way a connoisseur's collection. But interest in them dwindled and now we usually have to go to a cottage garden to find them. I regularly pass a little garden in a village on my way to Bath, where there is a magnificent row of tawny crown imperials. Not only do they make an imposing picture when seen from the road, but the flowers have great individuality. I like to lift up those handsome heads to look into their faces and to see if each has its customary drop of clear water, and it invariably has.

They are among the oldest flowers we have. Parkinson wrote about them in 1629. There were evidently many more varieties in his day as he says 'wherof some are white, others blush, some purple others red or yellow, some spotted, others without spots, some standing upright, others hanging or turning downwards'.

Nowadays we have only yellow or orange, and sometimes these are difficult to find. Mr Bowles had one with variegated leaves and that still grows in the garden of Myddleton House.

Crown imperials need plenty of food. Manure should be added to the soil in which they are planted and more added when the stems

are coming through. This helps the plant to produce new bulbs.

At one time some formal gardens were kept gay by filling the beds with fibre and sinking in it pots of flowers throughout the year, and in the winter evergreen plants. The crown imperials, brought on in the greenhouse, flowered a fortnight before those grown in the open and were a favourite subject.

Though there was a mania for growing tulips in earlier years, it was the elaborately marked types that were cultivated. The growers had no use for self-coloured flowers and these discarded types came into the possession of the cottagers, who certainly had no money to pay for the expensive bulbs. Now there is a definite class of tulip that goes by the name of 'cottage'. They are usually rather dwarf, simple unassuming flowers, but I have never really known what constitutes a 'cottage' tulip. My hazard is that any nice plain tulip that is not a species or a Darwin or a lily or a parrot or any other of the special types now grown, is called, for want of a better name, a cottage tulip. I think it is a good name for they are simple and easy, they have good colour and strong constitutions, and very often they are scented, and what more could you ask of any flower?

I have always had great affection for that most typically cottage of all spring flowers, bleeding heart or lyre plant (*Dicentra spectabilis*). At one time it was so ordinary and so typical of the humbler gardens that it was rather dropped by more sophisticated gardeners. But not now. We have come to realise the grace and charm of its delicate foliage and the arching sprays of delicious pink flowers, with lyre-shaped petals which can be pulled back to reveal the little white lady modestly having her bath. *Dicentra* does so well in cottage gardens because it has shelter and peace. Although hardy in most positions it is too fragile to be buffeted by cold winds and its roots are very brittle and cannot bear to be disturbed.

Every spring for many years I used to enjoy wonderful *dicentras* in a cottage garden in the next village. They bloomed for many weeks and were a wonderful sight planted against the cottage wall of mellow hamstone. I miss them very much now that the cottage

has changed hands and has taken on the qualities of a villa and the garden neatly planted with geraniums and white alyssum, spaced out along the house and at each side of the path.

A great fuss is made of the dwarf dicentras, the new *D. eximia* 'Bountiful'* and the ordinary pink and white forms, which make such excellent subjects for growing under trees or among shrubs. They are all very pretty and flower for a long time, but they have not the character or grace of our old friend, the 'bleeding heart'.

Walking round a cottage garden in late spring you may spy a dazzling dome of greeny-gold and may wonder what it is. *Doronicums*, simple, easy and effective, are long since over, although they made a patch of glinting gold early in the year. On closer inspection the rounded clump turns out to be *Euphorbia epithymoides* or *E. polychroma* and the gold comes from the conspicuous bracts behind the tiny flowers. Whatever its name it is a captivating plant, with its compact shape and glistening radiance, and I think will grow in popularity. Unfortunately it does not seem to have the habit of generous seeding, and I have never found a single infant round my plants. Autumn cuttings do not succeed but anyone who can bear to remove the stubby little shoots as soon as they are a few inches long can have a nice batch of plants by the autumn.

Later in the summer the creeping euphorbia, *E. cyparissias*, may be filling a shady corner with delicate green. The country name for this plant is 'ploughman's mignonette'—but it really looks more like a little green cypress with a small head of golden bracted flowers. Tidy-minded gardeners are sometimes frightened to let it in the garden because it is inclined to run. It has been known to run like mad, but if it is planted where it cannot get up to much mischief, it can be enjoyed without reservations. I have a friend who put a scrap in a shaded piece of paving, and very soon it had popped up in every crevice it could find. But it was limited by the size of the paving, and when it got too thick, she pulled out handfuls and left it to repeat the performance. In addition to the greeny-yellow flowers on their shaggy green stems, that delight us early in the year, in the autumn it turns a glorious red.

It always surprises me that the little *Ornithogalum umbellatum*, commonly known as 'star of Bethlehem', flowers so late in the spring. In one's mind it is a spring bulb, which it is but it is late spring, almost the end of May, when it opens its white starry flowers, growing polyanthus-fashion on a short stalk, all delicately marked with green. It comes up regularly year after year where it is left alone, so the place to grow it is in grass that is not too coarse—or in a cottage garden.

One of the first flowers to greet the spring is *Pulmonaria officinalis*, a humble member of the borage family. And how welcome are those jaunty sprays of innocent flowers in blue and pink, often rising above the snow, and fluttering unconcernedly in the bitter winds of March. The common name is lungwort, from *pulmo*, a lung, as the plant was used in the old days to cure lung disease. But, like other popular plants, that is only one of many names. The little pink and blue flowers growing together reminded someone of the old saying 'pink for a girl and blue for a boy' so we have 'boys and girls' as one name, and 'soldiers and sailors' for another. In Somerset they like 'bloody butcher', going back to the days when every self-respecting butcher wore a striped blue apron round his portly person. More romantic is 'hundreds and thousands', for a big clump of *pulmonaria* is a delightful medley of pastel tints. Another old name is 'Joseph and Mary', why I do not know.

Pulmonaria officinalis was the one grown in most cottage gardens, with heart-shaped, spotted leaves, as rough as a calf's tongue, with blue and pink flowers growing together. The white-flowered form is icy and aloof and may be too pure for those who like richness of colour in their flowers.

Pulmonarias are very popular today with our liking for handsome foliage and good ground cover, but connoisseurs are choosy about them. They want the one known as *P. saccharata* because its leaves are longer and more heavily spotted. Collecting good forms is a regular gardening sport, and some of those found are so heavily covered with spots that they are practically silver. There is one good *pulmonaria* in this family called *P. saccharata*

'Mrs Moon', with very good foliage and flowers that open pink then turn to blue, but I have never found out who 'Mrs Moon' was or where she lived.

The red pulmonaria, P. rubra, comes out very early, often before the blue and pink. It is a fine reward for facing the draughty air of a February day to come face to face with little clusters of tight coral flowers tucked into cups of soft green foliage. Pulmonaria rubra has no markings on its leaves and the flowers are the brightest shade of pure coral. Sometimes this plant is called 'Bethlehem sage', and I have heard country folk refer to it as the 'Christmas cowslip'. There is a particularly good form known as 'Mr Bowles' Red'. It does not appear to be very different from the ordinary type except that the habit is a little more upright and the flowers a little brighter and bigger, and is just another example of the late Mr Bowles' unerring eye for a good plant.*

The blue pulmonarias are a little higher in the social scale and are sometimes considered worthy of a place in a rock garden. There is a little confusion about the names. P. augustifolia appears to be the same as P. azurea with P. augustifolia azurea* as the name for one with light-blue flowers. They divide again into 'Mawson's Blue' and 'Munstead Blue', but I have never found anyone yet who can find much difference between them. I prefer 'Munstead Blue', which must have come from Miss Gertrude Jekyll's garden, and is, I think, a more refined plant. It is deciduous and slow-growing. The leaves appear before the flowers as little folded pricks of bright green, and the intensely blue flowers are carried on six-inch stems. The leaves of 'Mawson's Blue' seem to last all the year and the flowers do not appear quite so spectacular with such a background of rough dark green.*

Pulmonarias seed quite generously and the clumps can be divided as they grow bigger. Though these plants look right anywhere in a cottage garden, they need more careful placing in a larger sphere. They are perfect in a wild or woodland garden, for their leaves get bigger as the season advances and compete successfully with the toughest grass. And for that reason they do not merit a front line position in the flower garden, where their