

AN
ALL THE YEAR
GARDEN



MARGERY FISH
FOREWORD BY GRAHAM RICE

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BATSFORD

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Foreword

'The garden to strive for is one that has no off-moments but is interesting and attractive whatever the time of year.' So says Margery Fish in her introduction to the original edition of this book. In the 21st century this may seem like stating the obvious but in 1958 it was a more surprising notion. The strength of this book is that it proves the point.

Starting as a gardening journalist then gaining a reputation as a lecturer, Margery caught the attention of more gardeners, and made a more lasting impact, with her first book, *We Made a Garden*. Having completed the tribute to her late husband, in this, her second book, she set out in detail how to achieve her aim of a garden that looks good all the year round.

This is a confident Margery Fish, making her own garden in her own way and writing about it with natural enthusiasm to help gardeners break away from the traditional idea of empty and desolate gardens in winter. In particular she focuses on the plants themselves, highlighting those that can be relied upon to flower in winter, on evergreen foliage plants that fill the garden with long-term interest, and on plants with unusually long seasons of colour.

Recognising that the period from autumn through to the bulbs of spring is the most difficult time for most gardeners planning an all-the-year garden, Margery highlights hellebores and hardy cyclamen, plants which in the 1950s were not considered particularly significant. Through her persuasive prose, based as ever on her own experiences at East Lambrook Manor, she raises them to the first rank. She also stirred interest in heathers as winter flowers, in peat gardening, and her infectious delight in collecting plants, like hellebores and the old hose-in-hose primroses, still delights us.

And all the while, her own appreciation of the way her plants grew and her understanding of how to encourage them to give their

best adds fundamental horticultural wisdom to her natural enthusiasm for the plants themselves. This is a book that changed the way we garden.

Graham Rice
2001

Introduction

I think all gardeners have some definite aim as to what they want to achieve in their gardens. Some people are collectors pure and simple, while others want a magnificent floral display from May to September.

Ever since I started gardening, I have felt that the garden to strive for is one that has no off-moments but is interesting and attractive whatever the time of year.

*In my first book, *We Made a Garden*, I told how we made our all-the-year-round garden, but there was no space then for details of all the plants for such a garden.*

A garden that is to be good always needs careful planting. To get flowers for every day in the year means that no space must be wasted and the plants chosen must have flowering seasons to cover the whole year.

My first thought is for the difficult months from late autumn onwards. Then the hellebores are in bloom, and, if the varieties are selected carefully, they will go on till late May and early June. Violets are not spectacular, but they bloom in the winter and early spring and make welcome groundcover among the shrubs. Spring is the real time for primroses, but they do not stick to rigid rules and many flower in autumn and in mild weather during the winter, when every little flower brings pleasure.

That is why I have devoted a chapter to hardy cyclamen. There are cyclamen for every month in the year, and the ones that bloom in the dark days are just as easy to grow as the summer ones, and often they flower more freely.

Bulbs are not merely a spring-time delight. There are bulbs that can add to the beauty of the garden in every month, and irises, too, can be chosen to furnish flowers for every season.

I always think geraniums are good plants to grow in an all-the-year garden. Most of them have an exceptionally long flowering

season, and many have attractive evergreen foliage that colours in autumn and is a blessing throughout the winter.

Flowers that have a long season of blooming have always seemed to me to be worth growing; they can help us through the dull times in the garden, and are usually easy to grow and need little attention.

There was a time when the criterion of a good garden was colour and the vivid colour of massed flowers the main aim. We still want colour, but not necessarily strong colour. I am glad that we have come to appreciate the beauty of foliage in all its colours and textures, because I am convinced that though we love our flowers and wouldn't be without them, it is foliage that gives that settled, finished look that makes a good garden. Silver plants, too, can be as effective as clumps of flowers, but the effect is permanent and gardeners are using silver subjects more and more.

No one could have an all-the-year garden without heathers. There are many that bloom in winter, and though those of us with lime in our soils can grow *Erica carnea* in all its forms and colours, there are many that must have an acid soil. I made my peat garden in the first place so that I could grow all the heathers I wanted, and then I discovered how many other lovely things, many of them winter-flowering, I could grow as well.

Most good gardeners prefer to see their flowers growing rather than picked for the house. But there are ways of having part of your garden indoors without spoiling the outside effect.

I suppose the winter is the best test of a good garden. Spring-time brings its own beauty, and one can be dazzled by the brilliance of summer and autumn; but the winter garden needs careful planning with plants that keep their attractiveness. If I can enjoy a garden in the winter, I am quite certain that it is a good one.

Margery Fish

The Winter Garden

I don't think any garden can be considered a success if it does not look pleasant in the winter. There is no difficulty in having an attractive garden at the times of year when there are flowers to help, but though there are a few flowers in the winter, we have to rely mostly on our general lay-out and our evergreen shrubs and herbaceous plants to get a pleasing winter scene.

Of course, some people don't want to go into the garden in the winter. My husband didn't. He had to walk from the garage to the house, but if it was cold he did it hurriedly without a glance to right or left. I know many people who are warm-weather gardeners, and put away their tools at the end of October and wouldn't dream of getting them out again till March.

What a lot they miss! I am glad I am writing this in the middle of January, with the ground white with frost and a pleasant rime on tree and leaf. I have found jobs to do, a few herbaceous things that needed cutting down, a few dead heads on the lilac that should have been cut off long ago, ivy that had started to clamber up the walls and had to be discouraged, and valerian on the outside walls that had not been deprived of its third crop of luxuriant growth. The ground was far too hard for me to weed, but I could stand on the beds without making any impression at all.

Well wrapped against the cold, I found the garden a very exciting place on this winter's day, and I tried to look at it with a stranger's eyes to see what was good and what was bad. I think we all get so used to our own gardens that it is difficult to be critical, and I try from time to time to look at my garden with new eyes.

My aim, then, was to consider which of my garden furnishings stood up best to real wintry weather and gave the garden a comfortable, well-clothed look even in the middle of winter. And as I walked round, there were excitements at every turn.

I read an article the other day in which the writer said he had no use for flowers that bloom in the winter. I agree with him as regards forced flowers. It gives me no pleasure to get daffodils at Christmas or tulips in January. And I think it is real cruelty to leave wreaths of hot-house flowers lying outside in cold frosty weather when holly and evergreens would feel so much better and look so much cosier.

But I love the flowers that bloom in the winter. Each one is a thrill, and I think we get as much pleasure from one tiny bloom on a winter's day as we do from a gardenful of roses in summer.

There were two little aconites peeping out of the grass to greet me as I went into the garden, lovely little things with such big green ruffs under their golden globes. The next flower I saw was my beloved *Cyclamen coum*, twinkling away as if it were midsummer. I met a great many more cyclamen before my day was done, great clumps of white *Cyclamen atkinsii**, each little flower with its deep crimson blotch. There were pink and crimson *atkinsii**, too, and under a little cypress a really lovely patch of deep pink *ibericum**.

On the rock garden, the brilliant blue of *Iris histrioides* dazzled me against its backdrop of pink *Erica carnea*. The lovely blue leaves of *Eucalyptus gunnii* were as beautiful as they are in midsummer, and they fluttered in the cold wintry wind just as they do on a summer's day without any sign of distress. Beyond the wall I met my first hellebore, *Helleborus orientalis*, in a lovely shade of pink, which I think is called 'Apple Blossom'. Nearby was a group of another form, a greenish shade of cream that is so typical of these hellebores.

On the other side of the path in my new planting, the first thing I noticed was a huge rounded bush of *Veronica salicifolia**, its pale pointed foliage not minding the cold at all and topped by many long spikes of white flowers. Nearby was a small *laurustinus*, not big enough to flower yet, but nice and green and happy and very pleasant to meet on a winter's day. I am promised a layer of Mr. Bowles's form of *Viburnum tinus*, which I understand is a much twiggy shrub than the usual form, with smaller leaves and innumerable flower clusters with red stalks and scarlet buds. I am

told that when it gets going, it is smothered with flower clusters on every twig. I can't wait to get it.

I am trying *Magnolia grandiflora* Exbury form*, in the open in this piece of garden, and I thought how well it looks. There is nothing so handsome as its large shiny leaves, which look as though they were newly unfurled. Near it is an *atriplex*, to be truthful, rather too near because the *atriplex* is getting far too big, as *atriplexes* do. I have cut many of its long stems to use in the house. Why don't more people grow this shrub, with its little leaves of grey satin? It was looking quite happy today, in spite of the intense cold.

I think the most startling feature of this garden is a large planting of the Italian form of *Helleborus foetidus*. While our native form is inclined to sprawl and spread, the one from Italy stands up to face the world. Here I saw a graceful mass of dark cut foliage with wonderful pale green flower trusses held high above. The contrast in the two greens is really most spectacular. The flowers have not yet developed enough to show the purple edgings to their skirts, but they are beautifully finished with bracts and leaves the pale colour of the flowers.

Euphorbia wulfenji is just coming into bloom. All the flower spikes are turned down preparing for this great event, and very soon they will straighten out into great trusses of love-bird green flowers, each with its little black eye. *Cryptomeria* is a lovely winter shrub. I love it in the summer, too, when its soft feathery foliage is a purplish green, but it comes into its own in the winter when it turns russet-red. I think this shrub looks best when planted at the top of a bank, so that it can settle down gracefully over the bank. Mine alas is on level ground, and not nearly so elegant as when it can sweep its graceful branches over a bank.

I have some good groundcover under these shrubs. *Lamium maculatum*, in white and salmon pink, is good all the year round; *Symphytum grandiflorum** is still only dark green, and we have to wait for its hanging cream bells, tipped with orange. Geums look well in winter, and so does the foliage of *Chrysanthemum macrophyllum**, in a delicate shade of green. The Caucasian form*

of symphytum makes a handsome clump of large hairy leaves; Jackman's blue rue is untouched by cold, and the new growth of the giant thistle, *Cynara cardunculus*, is about two feet high, two feet of heraldic silver foliage. I have a lot of the green-burred eryngiums in this garden, and their foliage is good in winter, as are the big clumps of *Carex pendula*, a graceful grass, and the great succulent pineapple head of *Kniphofia northiae*, surely like no other kniphofia. White violets are in bloom; *Vinca difformis* is pegging itself down wherever it can find a vacant space with little tufts of shining green foliage; the great red leaves of bergenias hide the little tight pink buds that will soon be open, and *Geranium macrorrhizum* make lovely mounds of red. A small symmetrical clump of *Ballota pseudodictamnus* near by is in splendid contrast with its grey woolly foliage.

There are flowers, too, on 'Harpur Crewe'*, the perennial wallflower that makes a sturdy rounded bush, which is beginning to cover itself with its double golden flowers. There are many blooms on the red pulmonaria, and I see little bits of blue and pink showing above the spotted leaves of *Pulmonaria saccharata* 'Mrs Moon'.

Fat white buds are showing on a japonica (I beg your pardon, *chaenomeles*) that hugs the wall as I go round to iris corner and see how lovely the red foliage of *Euphorbia sikkimensis* shows up at this time of year. There will soon be flowers on the dark green, evergreen *Euphorbia Robbiae**. I have only just cut off the finished flowers of last year, and now I see the flower-tips are all bent over protecting the buds for this season's flowers.

More violets here, pale blue and coral pink, the sad pink of the Corsican violet and the rich claret of 'Red Queen'. There are the dark crimson-velvet flowers of *Primula* 'David Green' and the brilliant yellow, each with a green eye, of *Polyanthus* 'Barrowby Gem', and there are coloured and pale primroses coming out in every nook and cranny.

More and more hellebores, the blue green of *H. lividus* and the deep maroon of *H. abchasicus** and *H. atrorubens** have been out for a long time, and there are neat clumps smothered in rather

small, deep plum flowers. I feel I ought to lay the bark of silver birch on the ground to show up the dark flowers of *H. 'Black Knight'* and *'Ballard's Black'*, the darkest of them all. The pink of *H. 'Aurora'* shows up well against its fresh green foliage, and near by the darker *H. atrorubens**. *H. 'Peach Blossom'* is a delicious shade of pink, and I always turn up the flowers as I pass by to admire. I think these hellebores, and such plants as Solomon's Seal, should be grown well above the ground. They hang their heads down, and it is difficult to see them without going on one's knees.

Now the Christmas roses do stand up stiffly on stout stems and don't hang their heads so modestly. There has been a great deal of correspondence lately about Christmas roses. To most people there is just *Helleborus niger*, but it is like all other plants—when you get really interested in them you discover what a number there are of each variety. The latest addition to the family is a fabulous giant called *'Potter's Wheel'*. It is bigger and better in every way than the ordinary forms of *H. niger* but I haven't had mine long enough to know whether it is going to be the Christmas rose of my dreams, with big flowers on tall stems, which will bloom for me in November. I first saw it in a garden in Porlock, and it certainly dwarfed every other Christmas rose I've ever seen, with enormous flowers of unflushed white. I don't believe it was the result of deliberate hybridizing. The story that came to me was that it had been discovered in a humble garden in the Potteries, hence the name.

I used to have a tiny form of *H. niger*, with flowers much smaller than the average on short stems. With my usual habit of not being able to leave well alone I felt it might do better in another place and I moved it from the niche where it was growing quite happily because I thought it might do better somewhere else. It didn't agree and dwindled away in disgust.

It has always been my ambition to have Christmas roses at Christmas time. Other people do and although I have bought a good many different forms, I haven't yet had early flowers. It makes me envious when I go into the homes of people I know aren't

particularly interested in gardening and see bowls of Christmas roses long before Christmas. I can remember seeing them with their own leaves on a farmhouse mantelpiece, in a twinkling copper bowl, above a log fire. In another farmhouse a crystal bowl had been filled with ferny moss and the most perfect flowers I've ever seen looked lovely against that background of moss and leaf.

And while we are talking about hellebores I cannot leave out my favourite of them all, *H. corsicus**. It is not yet out (in the middle of January), but the buds are there and I look forward to the lovely apple-green flowers which I shall have till June. *H. viridis* isn't out either; in fact, the leaves are only just coming through the ground. This is our native hellebore, and it grows wild in some places. The flowers are the darkest green of all, about the same colour as the leaves, but it is not a very generous flowerer with me and does not increase very fast.

A little plant I used to enjoy in the winter was *Lithospermum rosmarinifolium**. I was warned that I should not keep it through the winter, and after a year the prediction came true and I lost it. I haven't given up hope of growing it, however, and wonder if it would come through in the sunny front garden, with its southern aspect and the big chimney with its smouldering wood fire.

As well as the *carnea ericas*, which are growing on the rock gardens, I have some of the winter-flowering ones in the peat garden. There is *darleyensis* in rosy-purple and the snow-white 'W. T. Rackliff'*.

I have an interloper opposite the peat garden. I foolishly allowed a nurseryman to sell me winter heliotrope, *Petasites fragrans*, when I started gardening and knew not what I was taking to my heart. I very soon discovered what I had invited into the garden and spent years trying to get it out of the first place, but made a second, worse mistake and planted it in the ditch under the willows. That part of the garden was wild then, but now I grow my primroses and woodland plants there and I fight a continual war. I tug and pull, and cut and drag, but it retreats behind the stones that hold the bank up and pops out in another place, laughing at me. It doesn't often get a chance to flower, and I don't mind

because I get all I want from the roadside; but it has a wonderful time burrowing deeper and deeper into the bank and playing hide-and-seek with me. I wish it had better manners because I like those pale mauve flowers very much. They have an old-world air, with speckled centres and a pink tinge round the edge of the flower. I like the large round leaves, which are such a lovely shade of green, and the little round green buds. The scent is delicious, and I am sure if it was a difficult plant we should all grow it. As it is, I know that when I am dead and gone, it will systematically take possession of my garden.

I don't get as many winter irises as I should because I think I tidy them up too much. They really prefer to be left quite alone to produce their sweet-scented flowers from a tangle of brown leaves and yellow tips. To pull out the dead leaves is resented nearly as much as taking off bits of the plant, and though I get a succession of flowers during the winter months, I don't get the hundreds that come from the thickets of my friends. I do not mind, because I think two or three blooms in a pewter mug with their own foliage are more beautiful than a bowlful. The white ones are particularly lovely, especially the white form *I. unguicularis speciosa**. The dark-flowered forms are lovely, too, and I find the smaller flowers of the tiny *I. unguicularis angustifolia** most exciting.

The first two snowdrops to flower with me, about Christmas-time, are the giant Caucasian snowdrop with large flowers on long stems and *elwesii*, with its very wide and glaucous foliage.

Primroses and primulas come out very early in the year. I have *Primula* 'Wanda' tucked under hedges and at the bottom of stone walls, and she is one of the first to flower. The pale *P. altaica grandiflora** is another early one, and a deep orchid one which I think is *crispili*. *Polyanthus* 'Barrowby Gem', in pale gold with green eye and a delicious scent, is out in January, and 'Bartimaeus', the one-eyed polyanthus, was blooming in December.

There are always odd flowers out in January, flowers that really have no business to be blooming now, the shaggy little double daisies in pink and white, and odd violas and pansies. *Viola* 'Iden Gem' never stops flowering and there is a little cream one that

usually braves the winter. I expect *Othonnopsis cheirifolia** to flower about this time. Its blue-grey fleshy foliage is always good, and the small yellow daisies usually start to flower in January.

I always get a delighted surprise when I meet my leucojums blooming their heads off so early in the year. I had to cut back a rather rampant plant of *Artemisia canescens** which was knocking them about. Why don't we grow more leucojums, I wonder. They come earlier than snowdrops and they are so sumptuous. Their leaves are wide and lush shining green, and the flowers are bigger and fuller, rather like crinolined skirts in glistening white, with pointed, green-tipped petals. There are snowflakes that bloom in the summer and snowflakes that bloom in the autumn, but the one that charms us in the middle of winter, *L. vernum*, is the one for me.

A great deal is written these days about the shrubs that bloom in the winter. I think all gardeners must know about *Prunus subhirtella autumnalis**, which looks as though a snowstorm had decked the tree, and which I like to gaze at with a wintry sun and blue sky. Witch Hazel is always amusing, with its tiny yellow spider flowers, and later there is *Cornus mas*, with more yellow flowers on bare branches. I have dwarf veronica which blooms all through the winter. It was given to me as *V. 'Morning Glory'**. I have never seen it anywhere except that one garden, nor do I know any nursery that grows it. When I say 'Morning Glory'* people think I mean 'Autumn Glory', which I don't. My little shrub is not so dark in leaf or flower as 'Autumn Glory', it is neater and far more generous with its flowers. I can always cut a bunch from it any day during the winter.

I think *Chimonanthus fragrans**, Wintersweet, should be near the house so that the wonderful scent from its blossoms can come stealing in when windows are open. People are always belittling the flowers of this shrub, and call them 'dowdy', insignificant or uninteresting. I don't agree. I love to see those waxy blossoms shining in the sunshine, each with an inward glow from the encircling embrace of crimson petals. I put my tree in the corner of the house between south and west walls, but it was a mistake. The

position is all right, but there are windows on each wall, and *chimonanthus*, when she gets going, becomes a very fine girl. To stop her obscuring the windows we have to chop very vigorously, and now I get most of the flowers just below my bedroom windows. Those windows are small and heavily barred with iron, which makes it very difficult for me to cut the little sprigs of scented loveliness I like to put in my mixed bowl.

Another mistake was to plant *Garrya elliptica* bang in front of the sitting-room window. Again it gets big, and has to be cut ruthlessly if all daylight is not to be obscured. And the pruning must be done very early in the year or there will be no lovely green catkins for the winter. I have put another one in with its back to the hedge, because I know the day will come when the old fellow will have to go.

I am not worried about *Daphne laureola*, who lives near by. She may get buxom, but it will be in a dumpy way. Again, I hear people say rude things about her, but I love that dark shining foliage and the tiny green flowers that come in winter and smell so sweet. I agree she is not so showy as her lovely purple-flowered sister and the even lovelier white form, but I think we need shrubs which keep their leaves in winter. That is why I like *Veronica cupressoides**, which is just as lovely with its blue-grey haze in winter as summer, and has the same aromatic fragrance.

The mahonias are great winter stand-bys. I believe the aristocratic *Mahonia lomariifolium** is not quite as hardy as the others, but I have it growing in a sheltered corner and find it quite hardy. I know it is heresy, but I prefer *M. bealei**, with its deliciously scented flowers, in greeny yellow. To me the flowers of *M. lomariifolium** are too yellow, too stiff, and have no scent. When we came here there was a mass of *M. aquifolium* growing in the wall at the corner of the front garden. It is a good thing I like to see its shiny dark leaves sprouting out of a high, dreary wall, because it is quite certain I could never get rid of it without pulling the wall down. Later on there will be cheerful yellow flowers, not scented of course, but quite useful for cutting when there isn't much else.