

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-108-07667-8 - Pot-Pourri from a Surrey Garden
 C.W. Earle
 Excerpt
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POT-POURRI FROM A SURREY GARDEN

—◆—
JANUARY

Introductory—Indispensable books—An old Hertfordshire garden—
 Reminiscences—My present garden plants in a London room—
 Japanese floral arrangement—Cooking vegetables and fruit—
 Making coffee—Early blossoms—Winter gardening—Frost pic-
 tures on window-panes.

January 2nd.—I am not going to write a gardening book, or a cookery book, or a book on furnishing or education. Plenty of these have been published lately. I merely wish to talk to you on paper about several subjects as they occur to me throughout one year; and if such desultory notes prove to be of any use to you or others, so much the better. One can only teach from personal knowledge; yet how exceedingly limited that is!

The fact that I shall mention gardening every month will give this subject preponderance throughout the book. At the same time I shall in no way attempt to supersede books on gardening, that are much fuller and more complete than anything I could write. For those who care to learn gardening in the way I have learnt, I may mention, before I go further, three books which seem to me absolutely essential—‘The English Flower Garden,’ by W. Robinson; ‘The Vegetable Garden,’ translated from the French, edited by W. Robinson; and Johnson’s

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‘Gardener’s Dictionary,’ by C. H. Wright and D. Dewar. This last supplies any deficiencies in the other two, and it teaches the cultivation of plants under glass.

The cookery book to which I shall refer is ‘Dainty Dishes,’ by Lady Harriet Sinclair. It is an old one, and has often been reprinted. I have known it all my married life, and have found no other book on cooking so useful, so clear, or in such good taste. It is the only English cookery book I know that has been translated into German.

I have given you the names of these books, as it is through them I have learnt most of what I know, both in gardening and cooking. It is, however, undeniable that, as the old proverb says, you may drag a horse to the water, but you can’t make him drink ; and unless, when I name plants or vegetables for the table, you look them up in the books, you will derive very little benefit from these notes.

Just now it seems as if everybody wrote books which nobody reads. This is probably what I am doing myself ; but, so far as gardening is concerned, at any rate, I have read and studied very hard, as I began to learn quite late in life. I never buy a plant, or have one given me, without looking it up in the books and providing it with the best treatment in my power. If a plant fails, I always blame myself, and feel sure I have cultivated it wrongly. No day goes by without my studying some of my books or reading one or more of the very excellent gardening newspapers that are published weekly. This is how I also learnt cooking when I was younger, always going to the book when a dish was wrong. In this way one becomes independent of cooks and gardeners, because, if they leave, one can always teach another. Nothing is more unjust than the way a great many people find fault with their gardeners, and, like the

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Egyptians of old, demand bricks without straw. How can a man who has had little education and no experience be expected to know about plants that come from all parts of the world, and require individual treatment and understanding to make them grow here at all? Or how can a cook be expected to dress vegetables when she has never been taught how to do it? In England her one instruction has usually been to throw a large handful of coarse soda into the water, with a view to making it soft and keeping the colour of the vegetables, whereas, in fact, she by so doing destroys their health-giving properties; and every housekeeper should see that it is not done. Her next idea is to hand over the cooking of the vegetables to a raw girl of a kitchen-maid, if she has one.

I am most anxious that anybody who does not care for old Herbals should pass over those catalogued in March; but, on the other hand, that those who are interested in gardening should look through the November list of books, as they will find many modern ones mentioned there which may be useful to them for practical purposes.

My hope and wish is that my reader will take me by the hand; for I do not reap, and I do not sow. I am merely, like so many other women of the past and present, a patient gleaner in the fields of knowledge, and absolutely dependent on human sympathy in order to do anything at all. I cannot explain too much that the object of my book is to try to make everyone think for him or herself, and at the same time to profit by the instruction which in these days is so easy to get, and is all around us. Women are still behind the other sex in the power of thinking at all, much more so in the power of thinking of several things at once. I hope the coming women may see the great advantage of training their minds early in life to be a practical denial of Swift's cynical assertion that 'mankind

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are as unfit for flying as for thinking.' Nothing can be done well without thought—certainly not gardening, nor house-keeping, nor managing children. A curious example of this is given in a recently published account of the most famous of modern jugglers. He says that he trained his brain in youth to exert itself in three different ways at the same time. This no doubt is the reason that he is now pre-eminent in his own line.

January 3rd.—I will begin by telling you that I was brought up for the most part in the country, in a beautiful, wild, old-fashioned garden. This garden, through circumstances, had remained in the hands of an old gardener for more than thirty years, which carries us back nearly a century. Like so many young people I see about me now, I cared only for the flowers growing, that I might have the pleasure of picking them. Mr. Ruskin says that it is luxurious and pleasure-loving people who like them gathered. Gardening is, I think, essentially the amusement of the middle-aged and old. The lives of the young, as a rule, are too full to give the time and attention required.

Almost all that has remained in my mind of my young days in this garden is how wonderfully the old man kept the place. He succeeded in flowering many things year after year with no one to help him, and with the frost in the valley to contend against in spring. It was difficult, too, for him to get seeds or plants, since the place was held by joint owners, whom he did not like to ask for them. The spot was very sheltered, and that is one of the greatest of all secrets for plant cultivation. An ever-flowing mill-stream ran all round the garden; and the hedges of China-roses, Sweetbriar, Honeysuckle, and white Hawthorn tucked their toes into the soft mud, and throve year after year. The old man was a philosopher in his way, and when on a cold March morning my

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sisters and I used to rush out after lessons and ask him what the weather was going to be, he would stop his digging, look up at the sky, and say: 'Well, miss, it may be fine and it may be wet; and if the sun comes out, it will be warmer.' After this solemn announcement he would wipe his brow and resume his work, and we went off, quite satisfied, to our well-known haunts in the Hertfordshire woods, to gather Violets and Primroses for our mother, who loved them. All this, you will see, laid a very small foundation for any knowledge of gardening; and yet, owing to the vivid character of the impressions of youth, it left a memory that was very useful to me when I took up gardening later in life. To this day I can smell the tall white double Rockets that throve so well in the damp garden, and scented the evening air. They grew by the side of glorious bunches of Oriental Poppies and the on-coming spikes of the feathery *Spiraea aruncus*. This garden had peculiar charms for us, because, though we hardly realised it, such gardens were already beginning to grow out of fashion, sacrificed to the new bedding-out system, which altered the whole gardening of Europe. I shall allude to this again. I can never think of this old home without my thoughts recurring to Hood's poem 'I remember! I remember!' too well known perhaps, even by the young, to justify my quoting it here. Equally graven on my memory is a much less familiar little poem my widowed mother used to say to me as we walked together up and down the gravel paths, with the primrose sky behind the tall Beeches of the neighbouring park. For years I never knew where it came from, nor where she learnt it in her own sentimental youth. Not long ago I found it in a book of selections. It was written by John Hamilton Reynolds, that warm friend of poor Keats, who, as Mr. Sidney Colvin tells us in his charming *Life of the poet*, never rose to any great

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eminence in either literature or law, and died in 1852, as clerk of the county, at Newport, Isle of Wight. As Mr. Colvin remarks, it is only in his association with Keats that his name will live. Yet my mother loved the poem, which is full of the sentiment of our little home :—

Go where the water glideth gently ever,
 Glideth through meadows that the greenest be ;
 Go, listen to our own belovèd river,
 And think of me.

Wander in forests where the small flower layeth
 Its fairy gem beneath the giant tree ;
 Listen to the dim brook pining while it playeth,
 And think of me.

Watch when the sky is silver pale at even,
 And the wind grieveth in the lonely tree ;
 Go out beneath the solitary heaven,
 And think of me.

And when the moon riseth as she were dreaming,
 And treadeth with white feet the lullèd sea,
 Go, silent as a star beneath her beaming,
 And think of me.

But enough of these old woman's recollections, and back to the present, for the sentiment of one generation is very apt to appear as worthless sentimentality to the next.

The garden I have now is a small piece of flat ground surrounding an ordinary suburban house. Kitchen-garden, flower-garden, house and drive can scarcely cover more than two acres. The garden is surrounded by large forest trees, Spanish Chestnuts and Oaks, whose wicked roots walk into all the beds almost as fast as we cut them off. The soil is dry, light and sandy, and ill-adapted to garden purposes. We are only sixteen miles from London, and on unfavourable days, when the wind is in the blighting south-east, the afternoons are darkened by the smoke of the huge city. This is an immense dis-

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advantage to all plant life and very injurious to Roses and many other things. For five or six months in the winter I live away in London. People often envy me this, and say: 'What could you do in the garden in the winter?' But no true gardener would make this remark, as there is much to be done at all times and seasons. Half the interest of a garden is the constant exercise of the imagination. You are always living three, or indeed six, months hence. I believe that people entirely devoid of imagination never can be really good gardeners. To be content with the present, and not striving about the future, is fatal.

Living in London in the winter necessitates crowding the little greenhouse to overflowing with plants and flowers adapted for sending to London—chosen because they will bear the journey well, and live some time in water on their arrival.

January 16th.—I can hardly do better to-day than tell you about my dark London room, and what I have in it as regards plant life in this the worst month of the year. I will begin with the dead and dried things that only bear the memory of the summer which is gone. At the door stand two bright-green olive-jars that came from Spain, into which are stuck large bunches of the white seed-vessels of Honesty and some flowers of Everlastings (*Helichrysum bracteatum*). These last are tied in bunches on to Bamboo sticks, to make them stand out. Inside the room, on the end of the piano, is a large dish of yellow, green, and white Gourds. I grow them because they have that peculiar quality, in common with Oranges and autumn leaves, of appearing to give out in the winter the sunlight they have absorbed in the summer. Their cultivation does not always succeed with me, as they want a better, sunnier place than I can sometimes afford to give them. In a very wet summer they fail altogether. The seeds are

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sold in mixed packets ; we sow them at the end of April, grow them on in heat, and plant them out at quite the end of May. In fact, we treat them exactly as you would Vegetable-marrows, only we train them over a fence.

On the backs of my armchairs are thin Liberty silk oblong bags, like miniature saddle-bags, filled with dried Lavender, Sweet Verbena, and Sweet Geranium leaves. This mixture is much more fragrant than the Lavender alone. The visitor who leans back in his chair wonders from where the sweet scent comes.

On the side ledge of two large windows I have pots of the common Ivy of our hedges. We dig it up any time in the spring, and put it into the pots, which are then sunk into the ground under the shade of some wall, and kept well watered. Before bringing it into the room in winter, it is trained up on an iron stake or Bamboo-cane, singly or in bunches, to give variety to its shapes. If kept tolerably clean and watered, this Ivy is practically unkillable, even in London.

Then there are some pots of the long-suffering *Aspidistras*, the two kinds—variegated and dark green. These also want nothing but plenty of water, and sponging the dust off the leaves twice a week. They make pretty pot-plants if attended to during the summer in the country. They should be well thinned out and every injured leaf cut off, tied together towards the middle, kept growing all the summer in the greenhouse, and encouraged to grow tall ; they are then more graceful and satisfactory. They seldom want dividing or re-potting. I have two sorts of India-rubber plants—the large-leaved, straight-growing common *Ficus elastica*, and the *Ficus elastica indica*, which is a little more delicate, and the better for more heat in summer ; but it has a smaller leaf, and grows in a much more charming way than the other. Keeping the leaves very clean is of paramount importance with both

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these plants. During the winter they want very little watering, yet should never be allowed to get quite dry, as this would make the leaves droop. If, on the other hand, you see a single yellow spot on the leaves, you may be sure that they are too damp; and, if watering is continued, the leaves will turn yellow, and eventually fall one by one. When they are growing in heat during the summer, they must be watered freely and the leaves well syringed. Both kinds propagate very easily. The top shoots strike in sand and heat; and so do single leaves, if cut out with the eye and stuck round the edge of the pot. Another plant on the window-sill, *Phalangium liliago variegatum*, is of the same family as St. Bruno's Lily, that lovely early June flower in our gardens. It makes a most excellent pot-plant, young or old, for a room at all times of the year. It has a charming growth, and throws out branches on which young plants grow; these can be left alone, or cut off and potted up in small pots, in which case they root easily in summer, or in a little heat at other times of the year. The flower which comes on the plant in summer is quite insignificant. It is very easy of cultivation, though not quite hardy; and yet, when grown in a little heat, has all the appearance of the foliage of a delicate stove-plant.

In the middle of the room is a *Pandanus veitchii*. This must be sparingly watered. It is a delightful winter pot-plant in all its sizes. The offsets that come round the stems of the old plant root very easily in heat. It does not mind the heat of the fire, but resents frost on the window-pane. *Cocos weddeliana* and its varieties are most useful and well-known drawing-room plants, from South America. To save time, it is best to buy small plants from a nurseryman, and grow them on. They can, however, be grown from seed in a hot-bed in spring, but they are not very quick growers.

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I have, wedged in Japanese vases in the Japanese way, which is so highly decorative,¹ two branches of *Solanum hybridum* (Winter Cherry) grown from seed. They last much longer in a room, I find, if cut, stuck into clean water, and held up by the wedge, than they do when growing in a pot; cutting the plants well back makes them a better shape, and they flower and fruit more freely the following year.

In a brass Indian vase on a corner of the chimney-piece there are some long branches of the Double Plum (*Prunus spinosa flore pleno*). These branches, with their bright green, bring spring into the room more effectively than anything I know. The little shrub is easy of cultivation, and more than most things repays potting-up and forcing. We plant them out in spring in a half-shady reserve border, and in August we cut with a spade round the roots of those plants which we intend to pot up in October. They do best if allowed to rest alternate years. The charming single *Deutzia gracilis* is treated in exactly the same way.

Never forget, in the arranging of cut flowers, that all shrubby plants and many perennials last much longer in water if the stalks are peeled. The reason is obvious: the thick bark prevents the absorption of enough water. In the case of succulent plants, splitting up the ends of the stalks is often sufficient.

On a table below the chimney-piece is a small flower-glass filled with a pretty early greenhouse flower,

¹ For a description of what this means I must refer you to Mr. J. Conder's interesting book (*The Flowers of Japan and the Art of Floral Arrangement*), and to a review of it reprinted at the end of this volume, by kind permission of Mr. W. Robinson, from *The Garden* (37 Southampton Street, Strand) of October 6th, 1894. My allusions to cut-flower decorations all the year round will not be understood without a careful reading of this article.