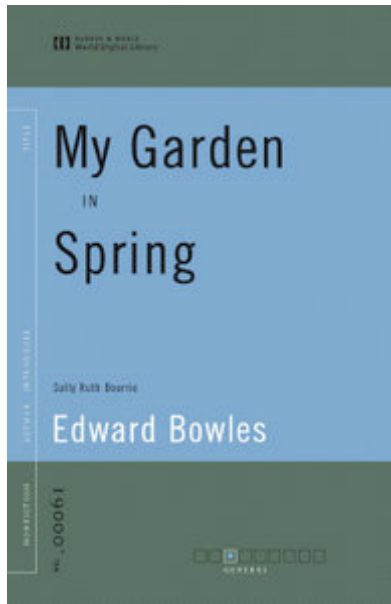


Wrote introduction to Edward Bowles' garden classic, *My Garden in Spring*, World Digital Library edition (2002; no longer available)



My Garden in Spring
by Edward Bowles

Imagine strolling through one of the world's finest gardens on the arm of the man who created it—and who doesn't mince words about its habitants. In *My Garden in Spring* (1914), the first of Edward Augustus Bowles' seasonal trilogy about his garden near London, the master does just that, displaying the warmth and wit that endeared him to everyone he knew. And what a garden! During his sixty-five years of travel and cultivating his property, Bowles assembled one of the world's finest collections of rare plants at his home, Myddelton House. Simply put, Bowles was jazzed by plants. In *My Garden in Spring*, Bowles unpretentiously chats with his readers on paper, sharing his passion, imparting his encyclopedic knowledge effortlessly, as if visiting over a cup of tea. Each of his leafy charges—whether "enamelled jewel," "promising youngster," or "queer [and] cranky"—was to him an individual with its own personality and needs. Bowles' combination of erudition and conversation has earned *My Garden in Spring* accolades from the time it first appeared. In the near century since its publication, it's become a classic.

The key to *My Garden in Spring*'s endurance is E.A. "Gussie" Bowles (1865-1954) himself. Known as "Bowley" to his Royal Horticulture Society friends, "Uncle Gussie" to the underprivileged boys he educated, and "Uncle G" to the children for whom he wrote, Bowles never lost touch with his humanity, even as he immersed himself in the nomenclature of the narcissus. It's not surprising that the clerical profession had been his first choice. But, in 1887, after tuberculosis felled two siblings, leaving only Bowles and his brother, he returned to Myddelton House to care for his grief-stricken parents and serve the community. Within a few years, he had also begun to transform its grounds from seasonal Victorian bedding schemes to the

year-round plantings that anticipated modern concepts of gardening.

But Bowles was first and foremost a gardener, not a garden designer. His interest was in the plants themselves. Despite having lost sight in one eye as a child, Bowles could identify plants from a distance better than most specialists-and when he went blind late in life, he added taste to his ability to recognize plants by touch. Through his generosity, new plants were introduced throughout the British Isles and beyond. He vowed never to sell a plant and always greeted visitors with-"You've brought a basket, haven't you?"- which he would fill with his treasures.

In addition to special varieties he bred and named, about forty plants have been named for him. More than just a plant collector and breeder, Bowles was a world expert on bulbous plants; his volumes on crocuses and narcissus remain standard references. Not only did he earn the Royal Horticultural Society's highest award, the Victoria Medal of Honor, but the RHS created a special part of its garden at Wisley called "Bowles' Corner." The spot includes many of Bowles' favorites, from his own Lunatic Asylum of "demented plants" as well as some of his special crocuses, colchicums, snowdrops, cyclamens, and his black-faced pansy. Since Bowles' death in 1954, the Myddelton House gardens have been restored and are open to the public, where his progeny are now sold.

Bowles explains his gardening challenges, which were very real: Myddelton House is sited on a deep bed of gravel and in one of England's driest climes, lousy conditions overall, which made Bowles' gardening achievements even more remarkable. But there's a silver lining, for a dry climate with great drainage provides the ideal circumstances for the bulbs that Bowles treasured. So he was lucky in love-and so is the My Garden in Spring reader because this is the best season for plants that spring from bulbs.

He spends a contagiously passionate chapter on crocuses, "my first garden love." About anemones, he writes, "There is a charm in the simple form of a single Anemone that goes straight to my heart." And the Lavender daffodil, he calls "more like some enameled jewel than a flower."

But not all at Myddelton House is sweetness and light, however. Bowles never hesitated to proffer his opinions. Take the "White Lady" daffodil, introduced only fifteen years before: "The distant effect may be a white lady, but close at hand the rags spell white slut," he declared. Throughout the season, Bowles returns to the same areas again and again, to see new personalities pop up. He enthuses about snowdrops, primulas, and irises, ending with tulips in May.

Bowles switches gears from plant varieties to describe special areas, like his famed "Lunatic Asylum" of contorted and just plain odd specimens he had come across. He developed Tom Tiddler's Ground to display his variegated plants, a bed that visitors found awesomely beautiful. He devotes a chapter to his beloved rock garden he built with stone carted from elsewhere on his property, designed with the same narrow crevices of nature to give alpine plants the long, cool root runs they require. Under the rocks ran a complex irrigation system of screes and pipes,

designed to imitate the waters of melting glaciers. He ends in May with one last tour, describing the days and circumstances of each photo in the book, which remain the only visual records of the garden at that moment.

Even though Bowles gardened the property for another forty years, his seasonal trilogy is the most complete account of the garden. But gardens are, of course, ephemeral. Bowles had wanted to update the volumes as he revised his plantings, but he had naively sold his copyright on all three books for a flat fee of about £80.10s each (which meant he made almost nothing from them, despite their success). The publisher had no interest in republishing, but offered to sell Bowles the copyright, which he could not afford. (The books are historically valuable because Bowles' garden began to decline during the Second World War due to difficulty finding people to tend it, and, despite restoration, it will never be what it was in his day.)

Bowles was one of the most forward-looking gardeners of his time. Unlike many who were looking at past styles to create formally structured gardens, at Myddelton House, plants, not architecture, dominated the garden "design." Bowles placed his inhabitants to provide them with conditions under which they would thrive. As he writes in *My Garden in Spring*: "I fear I am a little impatient of the school of gardening that encourages the selection of plants merely as artistic furniture, chosen for color only, like ribbons or embroidery silks. I feel sorry for plants that are obliged to make a struggle for life in uncongenial situations because their owner wishes of all things of those shades of pink, blue, or orange to fit in next to the gray or crimson planting."

His goal was unequivocal: "Collecting plants and endeavoring to keep them alive." Yet its actualization was not as simple as it sounds; particularly given that many, if not most, of these plants came directly from the wild, thanks to an enthusiasm for exploration that had begun decades before, when travelling grew easier and Asia more accessible. In addition to journeying throughout Britain, Bowles exiled himself to the Alps every June due to a severe case of hay fever. Malta, Egypt, Greece, Italy, Algeria, and Ireland were his foreign destinations. In contact with the other great collectors of the day, Bowles received many plants as gifts. At Myddelton House, a plant from China could be living next to a family heirloom, given their similar light, soil, and water requirements.

Setting perhaps the greatest example for others, Bowles created a garden that reflected his tastes and he didn't care what others thought: "Many find the garden too museumy to please them. I plead guilty to the charge, knowing there is more of the botanist and lover of species and natural forms and varieties in me than there is of the florist or fine cultivator."

Five acres was, in fact, much too small for such an avid collector. Unlike many landed aristocrats whose borders were designed to peak during only one season and be visited only then, Bowles jammed in as many plants as he could. As a result, his was a four-season garden, which is what most people today aim for, since we cannot avoid a portion of our city lots of terraces for three-quarters of the year.

All this talk of collecting may be misleading, for Bowles' garden was beautiful. Its aesthetics

resulted from naturalistic planting, guided instinctively by his artist's eye. Though completely untrained, Bowles painted exquisite horticultural watercolors, which are now owned by the Royal Horticultural Society. Still, Bowles' coloristic effects were more restrained than typical for his day. In an era when flowers ruled, Bowles appreciated how foliage could enhance visual variety, and he appreciated the form, or shape, of a plant as much as its flower color. Characteristically humble, Bowles attributed his talent to a "sixth sense" about nurturing the plant: "...most of my effects, blends, and contrasts have been the result of accident, or rather the placing and grouping of plants in surroundings I hoped would be suitable for their health rather than their appearance."

As much of an avant-garde as he was, Bowles was also the last of a breed, that of the great amateur cleric plantsman. He was introduced to gardening by the eminent Canon Henry Nicolson Ellacombe, a country clergyman famed for his exquisite garden, extensive horticultural knowledge, and garden reminiscences. Ellacombe's writings included *In a Gloucester Garden*, and Bowles emulated his informality. Like Ellacombe and his peers, though a generation younger, Bowles was drawn to the church and fit gardening and horticulture into a way of life that entwined the classics with botany, theology, and service. And like his predecessors, Bowles got his hands dirty on a daily basis. It was from that intimacy that he made his observations.

Bowles followed in the tradition of both landed gentry and the clergy in the belief that duty to others came first. In a time when government old-age pensions and unemployment relief were non-existent and fear of the workhouse was very real, the needy people in the local village appealed to Mr. Bowles. He considered it part of his work to respond to their letters, whether they needed a bolt of cloth or something more substantial.

Bowles taught in the parish Sunday school and gave sermons periodically. He served as governor of the local grammar school until 1953 and was president of the local Natural History Society. His birthday Tulip Tea was in May, where his twenty-two beds of reds, black, purple, and yellow blossoms nestled by the New River, and was itself a benefit for the church fund to which everyone was invited.

Bowles, who had been a frail child, always had a soft spot for the young. He built a night school for underprivileged local boys. On Sunday afternoons, any interested "Bowles Boy" was welcome to meander through the garden and stay for tea. Though reserved around strangers-or those he didn't respect-Bowles capacity for outlandishness surfaced as he entertained the boys by dressing in costumes and giving parties in which they shared his kimono collection. Bowles Boys were invited to fish his river, study his natural-history collection, and simply to enjoy exploring nature there.

Bowles' anachronism and eccentricity surfaced in, it seemed, nearly every aspect of his personal life. And Myddelton House was a window into the turn of the century; there was no central heating, telephone, electric or gas lighting. (When his new cook insisted, he installed gas in the kitchen, but complained to the workmen who dug up his lawn to lay pipes.) His young friend

and colleague Dr. W.T. Stearn recollected a February stay during World War II in which they spent the evening in Bowles' library, studying the nomenclature of cyclamen by lamplight, clothed in overcoats by a tiny fire, accompanied by explosions of V-bombs that shook the now windowless house. Even at the advanced age of "octogeranium," as he put it, he could be found on his knees, weeding his rock garden.

Rock gardening itself had grown popular as the century dawned, but no one would have thought it highly controversial. And yet it was My Garden in Spring and rock gardening that incited the biggest brouhaha the Chelsea Flower Show had ever seen. Unbelievable, especially when it involved the kindly "Gussie" Bowles-and when publisher R. Hooper Pearson first wrote his potential author in December 1912, the idea even sounded kind of sweet: "I am thinking of a small series of books which will give statement to an idea that was presented to me a little time ago. There would be three (or perhaps four) volumes, 'My Garden in Spring,' 'My Garden in Summer,' 'My Garden in Autumn.' The idea would be to have them literary and popular. In speaking to some of my friends on the subject several have asked me to invite you to write one or more volumes."

The fly in the ointment was Reginald Farrer, Bowles' friend and renowned rare-plant collector, whom Pearson chose to write the preface. Farrer, equally known for his skill at provoking a fight, used the opportunity to promote his own agenda. He complained about rock gardens that massed flowers as in Victorian carpet bedding rather than planting them in more natural-looking ways. Farrer called it "color laid on as callously in slabs as if front the paintbox of a child."

Then Farrer went further, attacking "the very rich," who were "out to purchase the glories of the Alps at so much a yard." Without mentioning him by name, it was clear to those "in the know" that Farrer was targeting Frank Crisp, who had built a four-acre 7,000-ton replica of the Matterhorn for his 4,000 species of alpine plants. Crisp had planted his treasures in broad masses for design purposes. In response, Crisp printed thousands of pamphlets berating Bowles himself, which the famed gardener and rosarian Ellen Willmott-formerly Bowles' friend-handed out at the Chelsea Flower Show. Naive as usual, Bowles, who read the introduction before publication, missed the implications of Farrer's invective. Despite a printed apology by Bowles, relations among the principals remained wounded. Whether this squabble ultimately hindered the development of rock gardening remains pure speculation.

So, while My Garden in Spring remains a snapshot of Bowles' garden, its fun and usefulness remain in his anecdotes and his helpful tips on growing and propagating his treasures. As he closed his tour, he reminded his readers that they'd seen but a moment in time, for that's the "nature" of gardening. So, he wrote, "If you have enjoyed strolling round the Spring garden with me and listening to my prattle.... I hope later on you will accompany me on a second journey to review the summer aspect of the place and plants. For that is one of the greatest charms of a mixed collection of plants-it gives you anew garden at least once a month, and in another ten days it will be no longer 'My Garden in Spring,' but 'My Garden in Summer.'"