Up in Our Country

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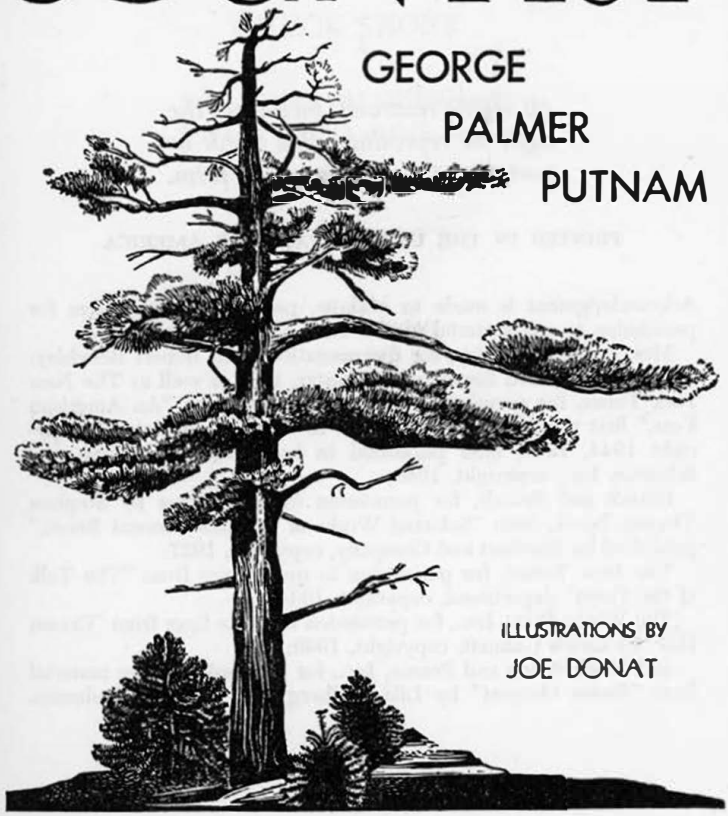

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JOE DONAT

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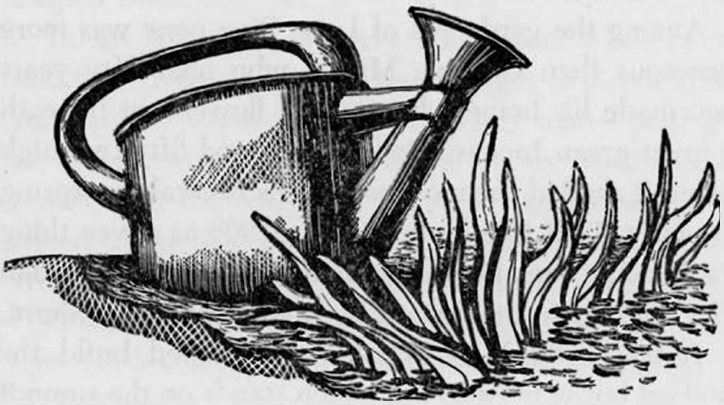
Contents



XII. High Garden

"Who loves a garden still his Eden keeps, perennial pleasures plants, and wholesome harvests reaps."

—Amos Bronson Alcott

Remote as it is, ours is a sort of community garden, for many have had a hand in making it a neighborly creation.

Early we found that plants brought up from Los Angeles, however alluring, did not cope well with our dryness and chill and altitude. The nights were too cold, the sun too hot for these pampered exotics weaned among urban amenities. Posies reared up in

our country, rough and tough, did better. They were not so fancy, but they grew.

Among the gardeners of Lone Pine none was more generous than Gustave Marsh, who near fifty years ago made his home a bouquet of flowers set beneath a great green Incense Cedar that stood fifty feet high when it shaded the mourners at his funeral one spring recently. That tree he brought in 1908 as a wee thing tucked in a sack tied to his saddle, down from Jordan Hot Springs in the distant back country of the Sierra.

It was "Old Man Marsh" who helped build the highest house in America, which stands on the summit of Mt. Whitney. From our terrace with a spy glass one can spot the slight break against the western skyline, tiny as a lump of sugar in the high distance, which is the profile of the shelter. During the summer of 1909 Gustave Marsh, for the Smithsonian Institution, packed on mules all of the way from Lone Pine, twenty-two hard miles, fourteen tons of cement, steel, lumber, and glass, and between electric storms and summer snow squalls got the concrete poured, windows and doors in place, and the roof on.

Actually my old friend did more than that. In 1904 he worked with those who completed the final three miles of trail up to the summit from Whitney Pass, where other volunteers had brought it. All of this was paid for by local contributions. The proceeds of many

a pie and cake baked by the ladies of Owens Valley helped build that trail.

In his last years Gustave Marsh was white-haired and frail. When he lacked the strength to putter about his garden, where his green fingers made prodigies of the growing things, he'd sit in his chair on the porch with the white cat in his lap and a red tartan shawl about his shoulders, often as not telling me which plants I was to dig up and how to handle them.

Gustave Marsh was born in England seventy years ago. He loved his garden and he loved his home.

"Englishmen you meet seem to be going home," he told me once. "Americans appear always to be on their way to the office."

Which I think is a sound observation.

African Daisies do not prosper too well for us, but the story behind them is a small Iliad of its own. Their seeds are a gift from Helen Gunn, whose girlhood was spent at the Minietta Mine in Panamint Valley and who latterly lives at what was Fort Independence in the days of the early Indian disorders.

The tale goes back long before The City diverted the water from Owens Lake, which then was a gallant blue inland sea instead of a shrunken sepulcher of salt deposits as it is today. For the mines in the deserts eastward the steamer *Bessie Brady* carried cord wood

from the Sierra foothills across the lake between Swansea and Cartago, communities whose dust has disappeared long since. The return cargo was ore to be freighted by wagon two hundred miles to the port of Wilmington near Los Angeles, and thence to Swansea in Wales.

Often that long route was by way of the Cape of Good Hope. An incidental harvest of one such voyage was a handful of African Daisy seeds given a sailor ashore, from some garden in the shadow of Table Mountain, perhaps in exchange for tales of faraway California. The descendants of those daisies still grow handsomely at Independence for Helen's mother, Eva Lee Gunn, the same who was nine years old in 1872 when the great earthquake brought the adobe house at Manzanar down on her, and killed so many, and buried the clock which started ticking again at the moment it was dug out, setting the time it was knocked off the wall at ten minutes past two that March morning.

Our daisies, then, truly are from Africa, with an aura of pioneering about them.

One day in Lone Pine, Peg was overheard lamenting because a flat of petunias that had been promised was not forthcoming. It appeared our season was so late the nursery down below, to which for once we

had turned, had weeks before marked petunias off their list for that season.

"We've got lots of them. You can have all you want." Mrs. Homer Chase introduced herself. "Just come and get them."

We came a few days later. The Chases lived at the City intake on Cottonwood Creek, twenty-five miles away. There is a neat white house beside the brawling creek, with great green trees shouldering over it and a bright garden set on the sunny side, where a few years ago was sagebrush before Homer tamed it.

We took *Petunia,* our pickup, and loaded her with well-soaked plants, most of them hardy volunteers from last summer's scattered seeds, cosmos, petunias, lilies, gaillardias, golden-glow, zinnias, and a fine fat young lilac bush. That visit was a product of the sort of neighborliness that graces living in our long brown land.

In creating a new garden in a remote place with a dour climate, you encounter special phenomena. And that quite aside from the fact that most of what you do is experimental, because there are no local precedents, so that you move slowly forward through the outcomes of trial and error.

You find, after a few seasons, and often with surprise, that poppies, geraniums, pansies, asters, phlox, stock, verbena, and hollyhock do badly. Iris, zinnias,

petunias, foxgloves, and canterbury bells and cosmos thrive; while columbine and delphinium grow large, lusty, and gay beyond belief.

While in the first years you score your share of errors, there are compensations. You don't have weeds and you don't have garden pests. At least, that's how we found it—at first.

It was, in a way, like voyages I've made in far north Greenland. Every one of the twenty-two people in our little schooner was in good health. And yet, a day after we reached the remote Eskimo settlements, where no one from the outside world had touched for over a year, nearly every local inhabitant came down with the symptoms of a severe cold, eyes and noses running, all coughing prodigiously. Even the dogs seemed to go into a temporary decline.

The explanation, of course, was that we from civilization had brought with us a vast cargo of germs to which we ourselves were immune, whereas the remote Northlanders who had been exposed to nothing had built up no immunities.

So with our remote garden. At the start it was exposed to none of the ills of urban horticulture, having to contend only with the rigors of its own environment. It was about two years before the first weeds began to appear. And then gradually came pests of one kind or another. In lush Southern California your

garden walks are slimy with squashed snails. A few of them even found their way to us, imported in the flats of our purchased plants. Then other pests appeared, in moderation to be sure, but notable because we had not seen them before—crawling caterpillars, large and small, who loved our willows, inch-worms, and various insects, each with its own special appetite for cosmos or petunias or some other salad; and aphis that shriveled up the shasta daisy flowers and pock-marked the columbine.

Outdoor pests, of course, are insignificant compared with those of Los Angeles homes, where the interminable war against them takes nearly as much time as gardening itself. Even the chance immigrants to Whitney Portal had a tough time surviving our winters. But their presence was evidence of what happens when man moves into a small corner of wilderness. With the exotic plants he brings, ultimately the pests come also. We had disturbed the balance of nature and had to pay for it.

Lately our garden has seen a dramatic invasion. Humming birds darting, iridescent, and companionable, have always been around, some nesting nearby. Then suddenly swarms of another sort of humming bird, not a hummer at all but a moth, descended on our richly blooming beds of columbine. They were the Morning Sphinx moth, each with a long tongue

which coils up like a watchspring between two flaps under its head, sipping honey through this tubular tongue that darts out beneath hornlike antennae.

A miraculously lovely creation to look at, especially beneath a microscope, its regal markings somehow reminiscent of the adornments of ancient Egypt. But if a fraction of the millions of eggs these fragile visitors are destined to lay actually become those long green caterpillars next season, we'll have a scourge equal to Kansas grasshoppers, a penalty of civilizing influences.

Frosts, the chill nights, and the torrid sunshine of high altitudes are not the only problems of gardening on a mountain. I have written of the chipmunks and their depredations, but deer are even more devastating. Deer and gardens combine poorly.

Whether lilacs and autumn flowers survive September depends on how you season them, for we found that deer do not like condiments on their green salads. Without such precautions our lilac branches were nibbled off and delphinium, lilies, cosmos, petunias often were eaten to the ground. One defense, a sprinkling of black pepper on leaves and flowers, sometimes does the trick.

Other tricks, too. There was, for instance, the ample Garden Club lady—the kind Helen Hokinson

immortalized—who was honoring us. One big beautiful golden white Royal Lily caught her eye.

"Oh, how perfectly precious!" our visitor burbled.

She leaned her rapturous face over the flower and inhaled deeply to enjoy the fragrance.

She did not enjoy it. Instead, her nose well charged with black pepper, she launched a prodigious spasm of sneezing. She said something about hay fever.

The pepper worked well enough in the spring, when the deer were moving up from the lowlands to the mountain meadows. But not so well in September and October when they played a repeat engagement. For one thing, there was more growing stuff then. Our season is short, and flowers that get started in June are at their best in the final September weeks before frost catches up with them.

During the full moon of late September, what the deer did to our appetizing blooms was tragic. In desperation I tried a powdered decoction called "Birds-Off," prescribed to keep birds away from strawberries and the like. The stuff gave the garden the ill-bred look of a dowager who'd put on four times as much powder as she should.

"Why," said Peg, "should we minister tenderly to the delphiniums all summer only to douse them so their green leaves and indigo blooms turn the color of sifted flour?"

Anyway, the pale decoction was all right for birds but it didn't work with deer. At best it only discouraged them. They ate the undusted plants first, then without prejudice concentrated on the ones we had treated.

During the nights of that autumn our garden evaporated. Even the lilacs were cropped down. Our produce must have built up many pounds of marauding venison on the hoof.

The Law says one may not shoot these darling deer, even were we equipped for wholesale and continuous slaughter. So that defense could not be invoked. An electric-charged wire fence, such as some of the cattlemen use to keep their stock where they should be on the summer ranges was suggested. But that was a costly project. Besides, it suggested inhospitable complications with guests.

So we decided on a dog. Adding a dog to the family meant that the squirrels and Ring-Tailed Cats, the grouse, martens, and skunks, would mistrust us. But you can't have your wild life and your garden, too.