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Fig. 1.—Modern geraniums showing large size of flowers

Geraniums Return to Fashion

Good News for Country Gardeners

By F. BRIDGMAN, B.Sc. (Agric.)

GERANIUMS have returned to fashion—largely because of striking new hybrid varieties that have recently been produced. These modern varieties have much enlarged flowers with individual florets up to two inches across borne in heads over six inches wide, in a glorious range of colours embracing whites, pinks, salmons, orange, reds, purples, and even chocolate shades. In England they have been used as a main feature in Buckingham Palace gardens; Beverley Nichols has written of them, while in America they have become nothing less than another colossal all-American cult.

This revival of interest in an old favourite is good news to country gardeners in Western Australia because geraniums show extreme hardiness in regard to drought—a big factor in their favour in wheatbelt and other areas where the water supply is often difficult to say the least. Geraniums are native of the arid parts of South Africa. Their thickened stems store water and food reserves—so stems can even be cut off from the plant and left hanging in a scorching sun for days and still recover. Generally geraniums are ideally suited to Western Australia's climate—more so than they are to the U.S.A., England or even the Eastern States. In most West Australian districts,

protection from frosts in the winter does not seem to be necessary—only in a few cold inland districts does it even need considering.

Moreover, the attention needed for geraniums is only moderate in its demands on time—a further virtue worth considering by those who might be too busy for much other flower gardening. They are thus very suitable for a farm garden. Diseases are rare in this climate. This is not to say that geraniums can be completely neglected—plants so neglected in poor corners soon become unsightly and have contributed to the undeserved poor reputation of geraniums in the past. On the other hand, geraniums respond excel-

lently to necessary care by way of pruning, fertiliser and general attention, showing vastly improved colour and flower size as a result.

A QUESTION OF NAME

The answer to the old question as to when a geranium is not a geranium is that strictly speaking, all commonly-called geraniums are really zonal pelargoniums and those called pelargoniums are more adequately described as regal pelargoniums. There is also a botanical genus, commonly called not geranium but cranesbill—quite a pretty plant with dainty flowers like butterflies in pink, red, white and especially blue shades, suited to rockeries and an excellent fancier's plant, but it is as much different from garden geraniums or pelargoniums as peas are from beans.

The names, geranium and pelargonium, are derived from the Greek (*Geranos*—a crane and *Pelargos*—a stork) and allude to the striking resemblance of the seed-vessels to the long, tapering beaks of these birds.

The garden geraniums are actually zonal pelargoniums so-called because of the dark horseshoe markings around the leaf. They arose from a cross between the two wild species *Pelargonium zonale* and *Pelargonium inquinans*, and botanically this group is called *Pelargonium hortorum*.

Those plants commonly known as pelargoniums are better called regal pelargoniums (*Pelargonium domesticum*)—a hybrid between several wild pelargonium species. They can be distinguished from garden geraniums (zonal pelargoniums) because of their crinkly deeply-indented leaves, and their vividly-blotched flowers.

A fourth group are those commonly called "ivy geraniums" or "climbing pelargoniums," (botanically *Pelargonium peltatum*). There are also other various pelargonium species worth considering by the keen fancier such as the oak-leaved pelargonium (*Pelargonium quircifolium*), the rose pelargonium (*Pelargonium graveolens*) and other species including hybrids.

But the confusion in the common names of our plants does not complicate their culture. The cultivation of all the main pelargonium groups namely the

garden geraniums (zonal pelargoniums), the regal pelargoniums and ivy geraniums or climbing pelargoniums does not differ very much. The regal pelargonium seems to have a wider range of more sophisticated colours particularly in the mauve, purple and chocolate range. Regals also have a shorter but more concentrated flowering season than the zonals, which, on the other hand have a longer flowering period. Individual flowers of the regals are larger, but the flower stem is shorter than in the zonals. It seems slightly harder to strike cuttings of regals than zonals, but both are far from difficult in this regard. In my opinion, the regal pelargonium is often better for garden display than the zonal pelargonium or geranium.

The term "geraniums" as used hereunder refers to all three main varieties unless otherwise mentioned.

PLACE IN GARDEN PLANNING

Geraniums can form the main backbone of a garden; between the tall trees and shrubs in the background and the small annuals in the foreground. They can, with their bright free-flowering habits, fill the dominant position in the garden. Geraniums can be used as a complement to and even as a substitute for, roses. Indeed the whole garden can be based on the various geranium and pelargonium species, plus trees of course, giving simplicity in garden design and economy in garden time. Geraniums are pre-eminent for window boxes, in pots, in rockeries or built up beds. The double ivy geraniums can be used in bedding as well as being put to all the normal climbing purposes—on trellis, on pergolas, as trailing plants from window boxes, and as cascades over rockeries. The garden geranium and possibly the regal pelargonium can be trained as standards like the standard roses—that is by nipping off side shoots until the desired shape is obtained.

When geranium roots are confined in a relatively limited space as in pots and other containers, their free flowering habit is encouraged and accentuated.

Regal pelargoniums allowed to grow to a large size can be used as specimen plants or even as the shrub background to the garden.



Fig. 2.—Geraniums have been used for some years in the most important garden situation in London—the Victoria Memorial beds in front of Buckingham Palace

Garden zonal geraniums cut well back can be used as low hedges or edgings to paths; zonals allowed more freedom and regal pelargoniums can be used as hedges.

Coloured leaf varieties of garden zonal geraniums can be grown as contrasts or reliefs to the masses of flowers produced by the large flowering kinds; or they too can be used for bedding.

PROPAGATION

There is no need for any special fuss or bother in propagating geraniums by cuttings in our ideal weather conditions. Cuttings can be either struck in an open bed or, for special purposes in pots at almost any time of the year. If struck in pots it is possible to use coarse sand which is an advantage for faster rooting—but if your ordinary soil is sandy this makes little difference. Pots do tend to dry out very quickly during our hot summers and if used during this season should be kept in a shady place until the cutting strikes.

The cuttings can be taken in two ways. About 6in. to 9in. lengths of the ripened hardened green wood stem can be cut and then left out of the ground for a few days before planting, after which, they are thrust into the soil. A second method is to take about 4in. to 6in. of soft, growing stem and put it immediately into the bed or pot before drooping takes place. Personally, I have found the first method more convenient and more successful.

Cuts in all cases should preferably be done just below the node or stem joint, or a small heel of stem left. Rooting hormone powder can be tried to hasten rooting but this is a matter of convenience, and is not essential.

Geraniums may be raised from seed—indeed this is the way new varieties are obtained—but to get seedlings with flowers worth having, care is needed in the source of seed used. Preferably, seed you have saved yourself from your best plants

should be used or alternatively, good seed should be purchased from reputable nurserymen if possible.

PRUNING

Much of the poor reputation of geraniums in the past was due to the lack of trimming given the plants, which were allowed to become straggly and lanky with little fresh growth, eventually ending as unthrifty and unproductive. Pruning of geraniums will well repay the small effort involved and is simple—there are no inner mysteries nor “dark of the moon” practices involved. The main aims in trimming or pruning geraniums are:—

- (1) Keeping the plant compact and shapely, according to its place or purpose in the garden.
- (2) Producing plenty of fresh growth and leaves.
- (3) Simultaneously maintaining its free-flowering habit.

Any method which fulfils these aims is satisfactory. Only a few suggestions are given here. An old plant that has become overgrown, lanky and unsightly should have the dead wood and all stems except three or four cut out. The stems left should then be cut off about 4in. to 5in. above the ground in the case of the garden geranium or zonal pelargonium and a little longer in the case of regal pelargoniums. Ivy geraniums only need thinning of the dead stems, some being cut out or cut back if necessary, plus an outside trimming. This should be preferably done in autumn or winter time, thus encouraging spring and summer flowers. During the summer, some vegetative buds and young shoots can be pinched out to make compact growth. Such summer treatment encourages winter flowering.

In subsequent years a repeat trimming can be carried out according to the shape desired, generally being less drastic than the first pruning.

With young plants recently established from cuttings, growth can be permitted to go its own way for a while and then the leading shoots cut back to encourage branching. Unwanted stems should be thinned out.

DIGGING

Apart from the digging at the preparation of the bed, plants should be lightly forked around after pruning. Weeding should be done when necessary but generally less work is needed in this respect than with other plants.

FERTILISING

Geraniums can give a marvellous response from correct fertilisation. There are two aspects to watch; giving the plant sufficient nitrogen, phosphate and potash for healthy vigorous growth and long stems, but not over-fertilising with nitrogen so that freedom of flowering is reduced. Geraniums need some nitrogen but not too much. If growth is lacking in abundance with a pale leaf colour, more nitrogen should be used; if excess leaf growth with few flowers occurs, nitrogen should be discontinued while extra potash should be added.

Ready-made garden fertilisers mostly seem too high in nitrogen for geraniums. One suitable available fertiliser appears to be Potato Manure A, which contains phosphates, potash and a small quantity of nitrogen. Another suitable mixture that can be made up at home is three parts of blood and bone, to two parts of super and one part of potash. Either of these mixtures can be applied at the rate of about one ounce of mixture per square yard twice yearly (including preparation of the bed.)

Little is known of the reaction of geraniums to trace element deficiencies. Possibly they occur, but geraniums are generally very hardy plants. If a known deficiency exists in your soil the specific trace elements lacking—and only these—should be used. If you suspect a trace element deficiency, or other trouble, it would be as well for you to consult the Department of Agriculture.

Well-rotted cow manure, horse manure or compost, but not fowl manure, can be used sparingly on geraniums, one application at the preparation of the bed being normally sufficient.

Geraniums struck in sand in pots should have their soil changed when the plants become established. A suitable mixture that partially retains water is required.

A suggestion is sandy loam or light loam, or even fertile sand, preferably the former, mixed with a small amount of compost. A similar mixture can be tried in window-boxes, pots and other containers. Artificial fertiliser can be used as described above, but there should be no need for further animal manure. A few crocks or small stones should be put in the bottom of the pot or container and drainage holes provided where necessary—as for other pot plants.



Fig. 3.—Variegated-leaved varieties of geraniums make attractive pot plants

WATERING

It is essential to keep cuttings watered adequately until they have formed roots.

Established plants in the open ground are very drought-resistant and will survive long periods without watering. However, in dry times as much water as it is possible to spare from any source will be helpful. Where water supplies are good, geraniums can be watered about once a week. In pots and containers, watering may need to be more frequent.

PESTS AND DISEASES

In this climate geraniums are remarkably free from diseases. The only complaint of any importance is rust and even this is usually limited in its damage. It

occurs as black spots on the leaves which spoil the appearance of the plant. Where this is noticed, some control may be obtained by dusting with sulphur or spraying the flowers with colloidal sulphur.

Insect or snail damage to the leaves is not usually serious but should they become wide-spread, the pest concerned should be indentified and the appropriate treatment given accordingly.

VARIETIES

The modern varieties from England and America have been slow coming on the market here, because the arrival of stock has been rightly regulated by quarantine. Some local nurserymen, I understand, will be getting a few new varieties shortly. Eastern States nurserymen have also supply difficulties and, in some cases, waiting lists. But some regal pelargonium varieties can be obtained in the Eastern States at the present time. Eventually plants will be multiplied and soon be readily available throughout Australia. In the meanwhile, many older varieties are worth collecting—though many are poor, some are rich in flower, colour, shape and even size. The following is an incomplete list of varieties both old and new—the very modern ones are not included because of their unavailability.

Garden Geraniums or Zonal Pelargoniums.

Strong-growing varieties with large flowers, each individual floret about $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter.

Gaiety—pink.

George Lansbury—red.

Josephine Osborne—purple.

King Victor Emmanuel—red.

Maxine Kovaliski—orange.

Pink Drummond—pink.

Pelargoniums or Regal Pelargoniums.

Large flowers, each individual floret about $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. in diameter with the trussess of flowers up to 6 in. across.

Captivation—white overlaid carmine, frilled.

Evelyn—white with dark blotch, shading to carmine.

Goldmine—rich rose pink with white centre.

Henry Perkins—deep carmine, very large head.

Her Majesty—white.

Lilac Emblem—lilac.

Market Favourite—deep pink with white edge, wavy edges, large flowers.

Mabel—dark chocolate shade.

Purple Beauty—purple, dwarf habit.

Rustic Beauty—burgundy red, dwarf habit.

There is also an old variety around Perth the name of which I do not know, but it is exceptionally large-flowered (individual florets $2\frac{1}{2}$ in) and free-flowering, being almost covered with bloom of a rose-pink colour.

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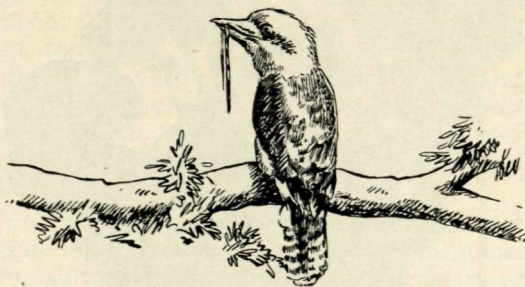
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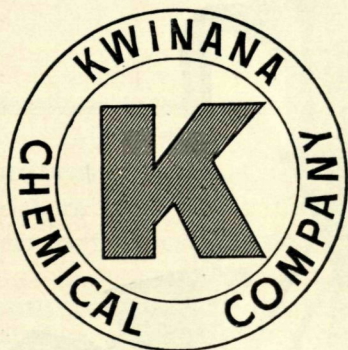
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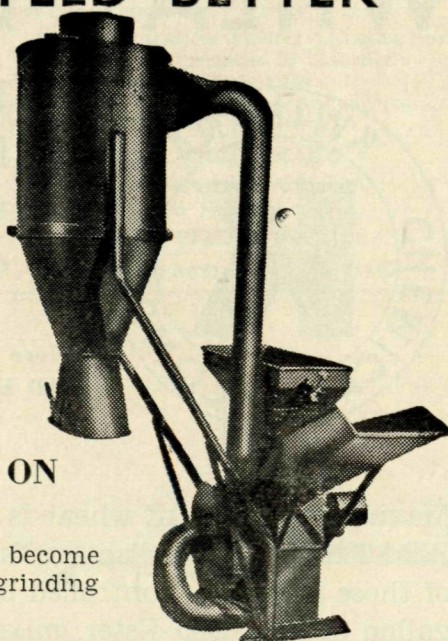
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