1

– Flowers and Their Colours –

First and foremost, flowers attract us by their colours. But of course it is not us they are trying so hard to attract: it is the birds, the butterflies, the insects, and those legendary night-pollinating moths. If a flower garden gives me the impression that it is flowering there for my pleasure and benefit, it is engaged in a deception. And if I fall for that deception, I am like someone who, entering a crowded room, believes that all eyes are upon him, when in fact all eyes are upon the swarm of bees visible just over his shoulder.

'How beautiful are the retired flowers!' wrote Keats in a famous passage; 'how they would lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, "admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose!"' In fact that is exactly what the flowers, even the retired flowers, are saying to their pollinators. Or, if not that, then they are saying something coarser.

And their colours, which provoke in us such a

profound and complex response, were once their exclusive property. No one saw such colours, unless it was in a flower, or a gemstone, or some extraordinary artifice such as purple-dyed cloth. Some flowers may have disturbed or repelled by their mysterious or obscene shapes, but none, surely, were thought ugly for their colours. Sad, perhaps. But never ugly.

Today some makers of gardens are so browbeaten by colour snobbery that they settle for a garden in which all flowers are excluded, or they take nervous care to check which flowers, which colours, are okay. Gardening writers, in the hope of giving the weight of science to their reflections, talk about combinations of complementary colours, and sometimes even refer to the colour wheel. But this is uncandid taste masquerading as high theory.

There is no point in asking, in the abstract, whether burnt orange will look good alongside vermilion. A garden is not a canvas, and even with a canvas the question has no answer. How large a patch of burnt orange, in relation to how large a patch of vermilion – and what else is going on within the proposed colour field? Is the gardener who thinks of placing a burnt-orange flower beside a vermilion one taking into account the colour and relative importance of the leaves? Or is it assumed that all greens are somehow factored out by the retina?

Gardening is quite unlike painting, but there are things one can learn from the painter nevertheless. John Gage, the great historian of colour theory, tells a story of Turner and Constable exhibiting their paintings side by side in 1832 in the crowded conditions of Somerset House. Painters in these exhibitions (and Turner in particular) specialized in last-minute tricks to ensure that their works looked well.

On this occasion Constable found 'the red robes of the dignitaries in his picture of the *Opening of Waterloo Bridge* (London, National Gallery) cast into obscurity by the wafer of red sealing-wax which Turner applied to the water of his cool green sea-piece next to it, *Helvoetsluys*, and later painted into the form of a buoy. "He has been here," said Constable when he saw it, "and fired a gun."'

Some small flowers possess this ability to 'fire a gun'. #1, Pheasant's Eye, the hardy annual *Adonis aestivalis*, is a flower with the force of a concentrated blood-red anemone – a small ranunculus, in other words. The kind of flower you would expect to find in a Mughal miniature, or in the border of a Book of Hours. You give it a place to grow. It comes back year after year, an unerring shot.

And in such company who could object to the classic Cornflower, *Centaurea cyanus*, #2, a flower

more often seen in the shops these days than ever before. The gardener should not be too proud to learn from the florist, or to plant what is so obviously beautiful people forget to recommend it – in this case, the flower which defined a certain range of blue.

I intend soon (taking a tip from the florist's bucket) to try out #3, the Safflower, *Carthamus tinctorius*, whose other name, the Saffron Thistle, reminds us what it is – that orange thistle which sometimes, on reaching London, seems to have had too crushing a ride.

It is the full orange I want, no lame excuse for a hue. People are sometimes under the illusion that the flowers they find ugly, or overassertive, are the ones that have been genetically modified. In point of fact, the flowers they find ugly are very often orange, like the incomparable #4, California Poppy, *Eschscholzia californica.* When I first invited visitors to my garden, they turned the corner and very loudly and flatly declared, 'I don't like *that*.' Perhaps I had let it seed itself too promiscuously, but I have charted its favour in the last decade. Today I think people would say, more tactfully, 'Orange can sometimes be so difficult to *place*.'

It means the same thing. It means, I don't like orange: it 'fires a gun'. But I remember one summer,

in the august Venetian courtyard of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, all the window boxes had been filled with trailing #5, Nasturtiums, *Tropaeolum majus*, the seed we are given to plant as children because it is large enough to handle individually: it is childproof. Presented so assertively and in such numbers, the nasturtiums dismissed any doubts about their worthiness.

For this list I choose the admirable 'Alaska' with its variegated leaves, and no two leaves ever the same; each one a masterpiece. In my garden we try to accommodate any variety of nasturtium we can find. Some we grow from seed, some from tubers. Nor do I like a year to pass without the orange lollipop flowers of the tall #6, Mexican Sunflower, *Tithonia rotundifolia.* 'The Torch' is the full-size variety. I first became aware of it on a visit to Monet's garden at Giverny, but I have no idea whether Monet would actually have grown it. The striking thing about Monet's garden – the part of it which fronts the house, not the water garden – is its brightness, its obviousness.

And you see how obvious my taste is. I like a flower the colour of blue poster paint, #7, *Phacelia campanularia*, the California Bluebell; of the purest lemon yellow like #8, *Oenothera biennis*, the Evening Primrose. I like the plants of childhood,

like #9, Love-in-a-Mist, *Nigella damascena*, and #10, Forget-Me-Not, *Myosotis sylvatica.* This leaves us so far notably short on reds and pinks, but not chronically short with ninety more to go.