
They say that illiteracy is on the rise in America. A number of recent American gardening books tend to confirm this. The winning formula these days seems to be a lot of pretty pictures with a little filler text, mostly of garden platitudes, aimed at people with zero gardening experience. The use of large type in a number of these recent books suggests that their audiences are not only beginning gardeners but beginning readers!

Color in My Garden is just the opposite. Here we have a book that is mostly text—a book that demands its readers know the difference between a dahlia and a delphinium. But the most important difference is that Color in My Garden is a book of personal knowledge, knowledge that Louise Wilder gained by actually working in her garden.

Personal knowledge is what makes the writings of such garden luminaries as Gertrude Jekyll and Graham Stuart Thomas so valuable. So much of garden writing is a rehash—of other garden writing. Not only is her knowledge, gained as it was through her experience, more believable, but because Louise Wilder did her gardening near Suffren, New York, her experience is more useful to eastern American gardeners than that of Jekyll and Thomas, gardening as both did in the benign climate of southern England.

And she gives us much that remains useful today. She has an artist's eye for color and provides dozens of excellent perennial combinations. Like Jekyll, she recognizes the value of gray-foliaged plants to cool down hot colors. Writing of bare places in the perennial border, she correctly points out that the problem is not lack of flowers but lack of foliage. She also anticipated by seventy years the trendy use of ornamental grasses in the perennial gardens of today. There is so much more.

The chapter that most interested me, Color for the Shady Border, was unfortunately the second shortest in the book. This perhaps indicates how far shade gardening has come since 1918 (and maybe there is more on the subject in one of her other nine books).

The sheer amount of knowledge that Louise Wilder shares cannot be absorbed in one reading. Color in My Garden is a book to be dipped into time and again. It is the sort of book that gardeners—especially perennial gardeners—should own. The twenty-four color plates, keyed to a plan of her garden, show better than words what Louise Wilder was up to.

You’ve heard the good news; now for the bad news. On reflection, the bad news might be good news. Let me explain. Color in My Garden is a period piece. What modern readers might consider to be the book's shortcomings actually gives us some understanding of the gardening life seventy years ago. In those days, hostas were funkias, day lilies came only in orange and yellow, and hardly anyone had even heard of astilbes—false goatbeards they were called. Between the lines, Color in My Garden is a nostalgic glimpse of a long-vanished era, of manicured formal gardens, of lattices and arbors and fountains, of garden houses where ladies probably drank tea following an afternoon stroll through the
flowers—an era brought to an end by the Depression, World War II, and the changing lifestyle of the affluent. The misty color illustrations further help set this mood of times gone by.

Alas, the writing is of an earlier era, too. Typical of some garden writers of that time, Louise Wilder's style, in places at least, is excessively flowery. There is much too much of the "fairy flax" and the "dancing with daffodils" for my taste. But on balance, a wave of biliousness every now and then, occasioned by such gush as "the rarest embodiment of all that is delightful, careless, touchingly fugitive," is more than compensated for by the depth and breadth of the solid information that Louise Wilder gives us when she's back on earth.

If you are serious about perennial gardening and can overlook the florid passages, you will find Color in My Garden both an inspiration and a practical guide.