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AN ENGLISH GARDEN IN THE ALPS

by Kathleen Watts

To make an English garden of an Alpine pasture is no easy task. There is not only the challenge of the elements but also the attacks of the animals both of which are more severe than in England. In winter the temperature can be 25° to 30° degrees C below zero. If there is a heavy snow fall, hungry deer come close to the house to see what they can find. Under the wide overhang of the roof a certain amount of ground remains clear of snow and here when we first attempted to garden in the mountains we put irises. When we saw amber-eyed deer quietly looking at us with our beautiful irises hanging on either side of their mouths as they chewed we learnt our lesson, or one of our many lessons; irises pass a better winter under four feet of snow than protected by the warmth of the house. Deer also gnaw the bark of the trees which have to be covered with wire netting. In summer the same deer leap over the fence and eat all the buds of the roses but this I imagine happens in England too. Then there are the badgers who in summer time dig enormous holes and eat all the strawberries and raspberries but this does not only happen in Switzerland.

But perhaps the biggest challenge of all is at first when one is faced with a completed Swiss chalet and an acre of Alpine pasturage. It is really best to remove the soil and then try to buy good top soil again to replace. But this is difficult to do as it is scarce and is usually kept by nursery men for their own use. Eradicating weeds with weed killer is a slow process and the trouble is always that seeds of pasture flowers such as the marguerite, lucerne and salvia blow in as soon as the old plants are exterminated, so that a continual battle is waged. One of the most vicious weeds to deal with is dock as this grows with roots sometimes two feet long.

Gardening does not virtually begin until May when the snow melts. Chalet gardens are then planted with bedding plants which are bought from the local nursery garden or market. The general scheme is tagetes, ageratum and red salvia or a variation of coloured petunias. Later in the season gladioli and dahlias are sometimes added. The peasant chalets as opposed to the foreigners, chalets are always decorated with pots of geraniums,

begonias and often fuchsias, carnations and the hanging species of canterbury bell. These make a wonderful sight. Nearly all chalets, foreigners, and peasants, alike, have window boxes.

It was in order to avoid the scheme of tagetes and ageratum that we decided we would attempt to have an English garden. We found that a herbaceous border which ran the length of the garden presented no problem. Delphiniums of all colours do extremely well growing to six feet in height. Peonies, phlox, poppies, fox-gloves and Michaelmas daisies all survive the five winter months and strangely enough flower only about a fortnight later than in England.

The question of time is interesting as English friends have arrived often and remarked that our dahlias are the same height as theirs in England though we do not put ours into the ground until the middle of May. The crucial date for us is the fifteenth of May because then we assume that there will be no more severe frosts. Then dahlias and gladioli are planted and the pine branches with which the roses are covered during the winter months as protection against the cold are removed. The biggest danger to the garden in the spring is the moment when the snow begins to melt, the sun shines strongly and it still freezes hard at night. Then it is that young trees or rose bushes die even though they have endured the coldest months.

Sweet Peas are sown in boxes at the beginning of May and taken indoors at night; they are planted in the garden in June and are flowering by the beginning of July. This is not catching up but on the other hand provided that there is no frost they will continue flowering until the end of October. We had several failures with these as we did not realise at first how much stronger the sun is in the mountains at mid-day. We therefore had finally to find a place where though they had the sun all the morning by the middle of the day they were in the shade. They now grow extremely well and we get long stems with five blooms, absolutely up to standard.

Cosmea, larkspur, love-in-the-mist and all the other annuals are sown directly into the ground after the middle of May and are usually successful. If, however, as hap-

pened last year, there is a frost at the beginning of September then everything is lost, dahlias, sweet peas and gladioli included and though the weather may become summer-like again there is no redemption. Then in high summer there are terrific thunder storms. These storms whirl around between the mountains and sometimes everything is dashed to the ground and the tall flowers such as the delphiniums can never be recovered. These are the hazards of an Alpine garden.

Clematis montana has proved difficult but after various attempts we found the corner it liked. It has to be covered over in winter and placing a stone over the roots seems to be a good protection against both heat and cold. It finally decided that it could survive on the north-east side of the chalet which was surprising as the "Bise", the north wind blows continually and is the most dangerous wind to plants. The only tree that will grow on the north side of the house is a Morillo cherry; otherwise we have had to give up as the cold is too intense, but on the other walls espalier pears and apples do well.

Raspberries grow wild in the mountains as do strawberries, so growing them in the vegetable garden presents no problem. Our vegetable garden is Swiss, not English, and into four yards by twelve yards are neatly arranged broad beans, peas, runner beans, lettuces, leeks, brussels sprouts and spinach. Following the Swiss pattern, not an inch of space is wasted, lettuces grow between the leeks which are planted out in the summer for late autumn and spring use (they survive under the snow).

The garden was designed so that the herbaceous border which ran the length of the lawn sloped upwards. Thus, sitting in front of the chalet, mountains form the background of the border; the effect of the dark blue of the delphiniums against the eternal snows of the glaciers is stunning.

In November the garden is packed up for the winter. The vines are cut back and bound up with straw and sacking and then covered with a large plastic sheet; so is the clematis. Pine branches are cut and placed over the rose trees and the garden is forgotten for five months, but with what anxiety spring is awaited to see how much has survived.