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Gerberas

Have Many Fine Qualities

By C. C. HILLARY

ALTHOUGH introduced to Australia more than 50 years ago, it is only in comparatively recent times that the gerbera has won the recognition such a lovely flower deserves. Now this charming South African plant has a wide circle of friends and its popularity is increasing steadily every year.

This is not surprising, since the latter-day gerbera has many fine qualities—qualities that make it one of the most desirable of all the small perennial plants grown in our gardens today. Refined flowers in the loveliest of pastel shades, superb stems, lasting qualities well above the average, and a winsome daintiness that never fails to charm—what more could anyone want?

For forming feature beds, and for growing in border beds either by themselves, or in combination with other flowers, gerberas are ideal. They also make splendid pot plants when grown in 5in. or 6in. pots. The plants flower profusely in spring, summer and autumn and, even in winter, when they are grown in well-drained soil and in a reasonably warm situation, there is a steady production of blooms.

As a cut flower the gerbera has few superiors, the blooms lasting up to 10 days when placed in deep vases containing plenty of water. The colour range is wide and ranges from white and cream through shades of pink, apricot, buff, orange and red to deep crimson.

The original *Gerbera Jamesonii* was a starry, brilliant-red, single flower, but skillful hybridising has produced fine-petalled, single flowers of circular form, as well as many really beautiful doubles. It is not a difficult flower to grow but, like most other plants, it responds well to good cultural treatment. Correct planting is of importance, since it has considerable bearing on the life of the plants, and frequent manuring is necessary as the plants are gross feeders.

CULTURAL TREATMENT

Deeply cultivated soil is necessary to accommodate the extensive root systems, and generous quantities of old animal manure, poultry manure, or a good leafy compost should be worked in when the beds are being prepared. A rich, friable loam is probably the most suitable soil for gerberas, but good results can be obtained in both sandy and heavy soils provided they are properly prepared.

Sandy ground will require additional supplies of humus-forming material and this can be arranged by increasing the animal manure, or by digging in extra supplies of compost or some well-decayed lawn clippings. Heavy soils will need manures, but it is equally important that they should be well-drained. If there is any doubt on this point, the surface of the bed should be raised four or five inches above the level of the surrounding ground, or the bed drained with the aid of agricultural drain pipes placed about two feet below the surface.

PROPAGATION

A bed of gerberas can be established with young plants raised from seeds, or with portions of old clumps that have already flowered. The latter method is the only way of ensuring high-quality flowers of any particular shade.

Seedlings vary considerably. Not every plant produces flowers of good colour and form. More than a few produce coarse-petalled blooms of poor colour and these should be discarded. The best way to handle seedlings is to grow them in small pots

until they flower. Those that measure up to the standard required can then be planted in the garden.

An old clump can be easily divided with a sharp knife and sometimes it is possible to strip suitable pieces from the clumps with the fingers alone. The important thing is that each piece should have a crown, or growth shoot, at the top and a share of the roots below. When planting the portions, the roots should be set straight downwards, not spread outwards, and care must be taken to keep the crown about an inch above the level of the soil.

Depth of planting is most important. More plants are killed by covering the crowns with soil and manure than from any other cause. For this reason, hoeing around the plants must be done carefully. Should manure or soil get into the crown of a plant at any time, it should be washed out with a jet from a hose as soon as noticed.

In spite of care taken during planting, some plants will almost certainly be too low in the ground a year later. The best thing to do with these is to prise them upwards with a strong digging fork during the winter. Although this treatment does break a number of roots, the plants soon recover from the shock and grow all the better the following spring.

Gerbera clumps are usually divided and replanted in early spring, but the seeds may be sown at almost any time during the year. The seed must be fresh, preferably not much more than six or eight weeks old, as it does not retain its germinating powers for long.

RAISING SEEDLINGS

Seed boxes are best for raising the seedlings and these should be filled with a sandy soil compost, which has been enriched with a light dusting of superphosphate. A tablespoonful to the soil in a seed box about 15in. x 9in. will be sufficient. Gerbera seeds are long and narrow with a tuft at one end. They should be sown singly, about an inch apart each way, by pressing the sharp end of the seed into the surface and leaving the small tuft at the other end out of the soil. Germination should take place within a fortnight, and six weeks later the seedlings should be large enough for potting or for transfer into the garden.

Gerberas are warmth-loving subjects, so the beds should be situated in sunny parts of the garden where some protection is provided from cold, southerly winds in winter. The plants will have sufficient elbow room if spaced about 15in. apart.

Ample supplies of water must be provided in summer. Any shortage of soil moisture quickly lessens both the quality and quantity of the flowers. Gerberas also appreciate liquid manure. This can be made from almost any kind of animal manure or poultry manure by soaking a small bag of the droppings in a tub of water for a few days. The resultant solution will be at the correct strength to use when its colour resembles weak tea. It may be applied every three or four weeks, but only after the plants have been well watered.

Gerberas are not affected to any extent by disease, but sometimes the foliage assumes a rusty or dirty appearance in late autumn and winter. These leaves should be removed and burnt as soon as noticed. The plants should then be sprayed with copper oxychloride mixed at the rate of an ounce of the chemical to three gallons of water. It is also good policy to spray all gerbera plants at the end of each winter with copper oxychloride to protect them against fungous diseases.

UNSEASONABLE RAINS ENCOURAGE WEED GROWTH

An unprecedented germination of the noxious weed, caltrop, has followed the February rains, particularly in the Eastern Goldfields area. Other centres from which it has been reported include Merredin, Kellerberrin, Tammin, Northam, Beverley and Wyalkatchem. Plants have also appeared in several localities in the metropolitan area.

Caltrop is an exceedingly troublesome weed producing burrs with stout spines which can cause injury to stock. The plant also has toxic properties.

As the plant grows and matures seeds very rapidly, control measures—spraying with 2,4-D dieselene or power kerosene—should be carried out immediately the plants are detected.

The heavy summer rains have also stimulated the growth of Bathurst burr at Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Southern Cross and Marvel Loch, but the position is much better than it was under similar circumstances, several years ago. Every effort is being made to prevent burr formation.

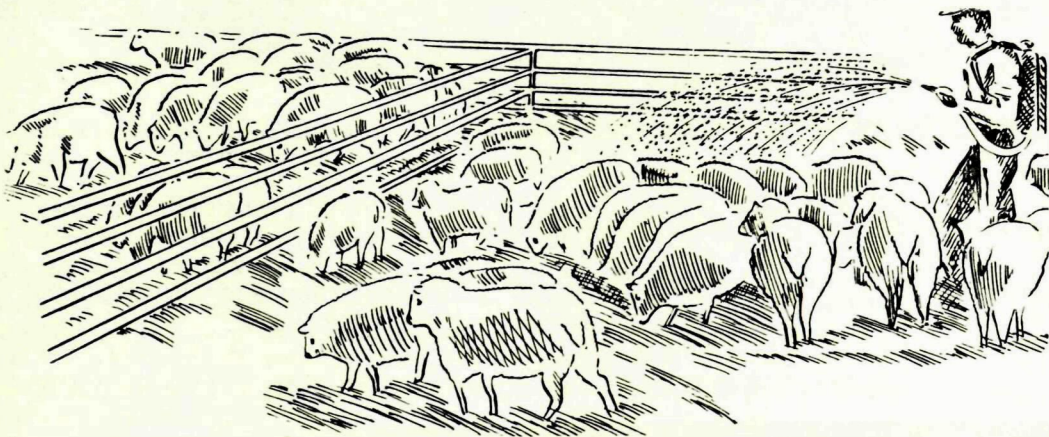
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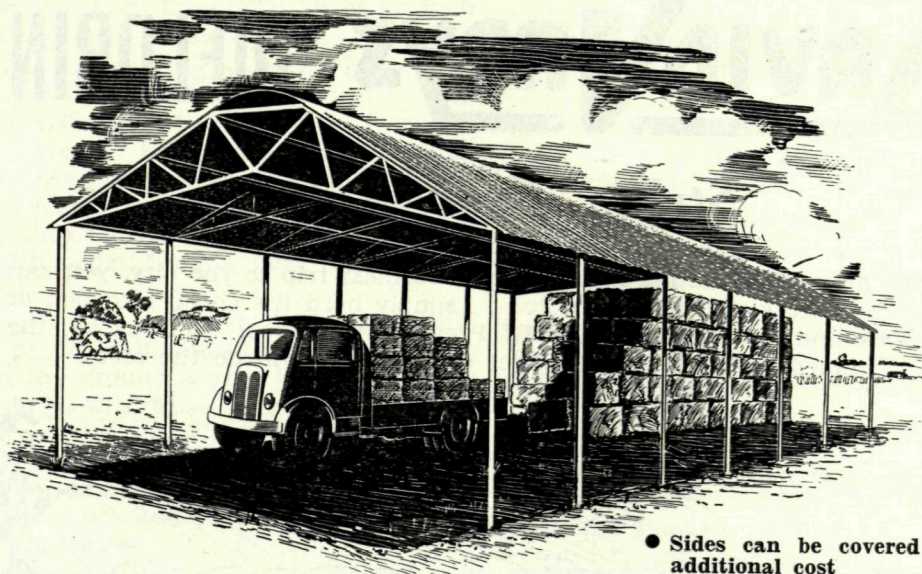
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