The Garden Book

by Javed Hayat

The ground is workable from the second week of March most years. You put a fork in by the gate and if it goes down clean and comes up without clagging you have the beds, and if it does not you wait, and I have waited fifty-three springs in this garden and have never once been sorry for waiting.

The rose by the gate comes through first, and I am never sure of it. A Bourbon, old wood all the way down now; it has had three winters in the last ten that should have finished it, and each time I have cut it harder than I liked and mulched it and left it alone, and each time in March there have been the red shoots low on the stem. Five this year. It went in the first spring I was here, and Mrs. Hallam dug the hole herself and had me stand and hold the cane. She said it was the one from her mother's garden. I did not ask where that was. You did not ask her things; you were told what she wished you to know, and she wished you to know very little, and I found over thirty years that this suited me.

I prune the apples in the first dry week. The Bramley fruits every other year and I have told the family this four times in fifty years and they go on being surprised by it, so I have stopped telling them, and now when it fruits they are pleased and when it does not they say it has been a bad year, and both of those are things I can let them have.

The boy comes on Thursdays. Twenty-eight, and I call him the boy because I called his father the boy, and his father has not been a boy for a long time. The heavy work is his now — the compost, the mowing, the tops of the hedges — and he is willing, and he does not see. This spring I had him stand in the long bed and asked him what was wrong with it, and he looked for a while and said nothing was wrong, and I did not tell him. It is the light. The oak has taken it.

The oak went in the April his father was born, before my time, and the old gentleman carried it down himself in a pot and put it where it stands, which was too close to the bed then and is a great

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/javed-hayat/the-garden-book--2»*
Copyright © 2026 Javed Hayat. All rights reserved.

deal too close now. The old gardener said so and was overruled, and I said so in my third year and was overruled, and now there is no one left to overrule me and no longer any point. Two hundred years in that oak. Perhaps ten in the bed. I know which of them the family would keep if they were asked, and so I have not asked.

Under the beech the snowdrops come in February whatever the winter was and whatever has happened in the house. Fifty-three years they have come, and I have never done one thing for them, which is worth noting, because most things in this garden I have done a great deal for and some of them are gone.

The cherry at the end of the drive leans. It was the children's — the son and the daughter, put in together as a stick from the nursery before I came, and the old gardener told me they had quarrelled over who held it and who filled the hole, and the old gentleman had made them do it turn about, and neither had firmed it. So it leans, and I have never straightened it, and neither of them has looked at it in forty years that I have seen, and it flowers in April like anything else, and I have sometimes thought that if one of them did stop under it and look up, the other would hear of it by evening and come and look too, and that neither of them will.

The lilies are up by the second week of April. That is Miss Hallam's bed, by the wall, on its own. Every spring I say the same thing, which is that lilies have no business in this soil and never had, that they have been lifted and divided and put back with a barrow of leaf-mould under them every year since 1986, and that if that stopped they would be gone in two seasons. It has not stopped. The stakes go in.

Summer is the grass. I have cut it twice a week from the end of May for fifty-three years, and now the boy does the mowing and I do the edges, because he does not see where the edge is, and because I can still do the edges.

The lawn was good this year. It was good the year of the son's wedding, when the marquee stood on it for three days and the week after it came up there was a yellow square the size of a room where the floor had been, and Mrs. Hallam came down and asked whether

it would come back, and I said it would, and it did, by August. I put in a bed at the edge of the lawn for the wedding at her asking — delphiniums and a white rose, something you could see from the house. That bed is the long bed, and the long bed is under the oak, and I have moved what I could and the rest has had what light there is, and this autumn I lifted the last of the wedding delphiniums, which had been three plants and then two and then one that did not flower, and I looked at the crown and it was done, and I put it on the heap. That is the whole of that marriage as far as the garden knows it, and the garden knew more of it than I did.

The wife was in the house nineteen years and I do not think I saw her in the garden a dozen times except to cross it, and I do not say that against her. Some people are not garden people, and she was a town woman, and he had brought her to this, and nineteen years is a long time to live somewhere you have not chosen. In a July she went. Mr. Hallam — the son; the old gentleman was gone by then — came down one morning to where I was working and said, not looking at me, that I might leave the far corner this year. I left it. The year after he did not say and I did not ask, and it has been twenty-six years, and the corner is nettle and willowherb and a self-sown ash that is a tree now, and in June there are foxgloves that nobody planted. I mow round it with the edge quite clean, so that it is plain to anyone looking that it is left and not neglected. There is a difference and I have kept the difference twenty-six years with a mower.

After that he came down to the garden more. Not to do anything; only to stand about near where I was working and talk, or not talk, and I would go on working, and he has done that for twenty-six years and is sixty-five, and has never said a word about her, and I would not expect him to.

The rose has its first flower in the first week of June, one, on the old wood, low, and I do not cut it. Every June the old lady had it in the blue jug on her windowsill. That jug is in the scullery still; I have seen it there when I have gone in for the key.

The lilies flowered on the twelfth of June this year. All of them. There is no reason they should and they did.

Miss Hallam came down on the Sunday and stood and looked at them, and I was at the far end with the hoe and did not go over. We have never needed to. Ten minutes, perhaps, and then in. Sixty-one now, and never married, and living in the house with her brother; and when the family is spoken of in the village it is spoken of as the two of them, and the boy, and it is understood that it will stop there.

I will put the lilies down, since I have put down the rest. They are hers. She planted them forty years ago, the spring she was twenty-one.

It was an April morning, early, before the house was up, and I was in the long bed and she came and stood at the edge of it and said she wanted to plant something. I said what. She said lilies. I said the soil was wrong for lilies. She said she knew that.

So I made her a bed. Not in the long bed; by the wall, on its own, where I could give it what it wanted and where it would be in nobody's way. She planted them herself. I showed her the depth and she did the rest, and she did not speak while she did it, and when she had done she stood up with her hands black to the wrist and said thank you and went in.

That autumn and most of the winter she was away. Switzerland, the family said; I was not told and did not ask. By March she was back, and thinner, and came down and looked at the bed, which had nothing showing yet, and I said they would be up in a fortnight, and they were.

Forty years I have kept them. A great deal of work, for a flower that does not suit the ground, and I have not once thought of stopping.

Mrs. Hallam's seventieth was a party. Sixty people on that lawn, both children home, the son's wife in a hat, the boy not yet born, the old gentleman two years dead and spoken of once in a speech. I had the beds up for it and the delphiniums were the best they have ever been; the oak had not taken the light yet. I stood by the shed with a glass of something that was brought to me, and she came across the lawn in front of all of them and said, loud enough, that none of it would be here without me, and went back. It is the only time in

thirty years she said anything of the kind, and she said it in front of sixty people so that it would be on the record, and that was like her.

The bench was the children's present to her that day, and she chose the place, which was under the beech where she could see the gate and the rose and could not see the long bed, which by then she had stopped wanting to look at. Most afternoons for eleven years she sat on it. Toward the end she was brought down to it with a rug and brought back up, and the last summer she did not come down at all and I could see her at the window, and I did not look up more than I could help, because I did not think she would wish to be seen looking. Since then nobody has sat on it that I have seen, and I oil it in May and in September, which is what the bench wants.

The old gentleman I will give his due. The yew he ruined. One August morning he came down in a temper and took the shears to it himself and would not be stopped, and I stood and watched him do it, and there is a gap on the south side that I have been filling for forty-seven years with wire and patience. It was the month the son said he would not go into the firm; I had it from the cook. What the temper was about he did not say and I did not ask. I have the yew.

He grew tomatoes in the greenhouse, which is gone now — I took the frame down myself the year nobody would pay for a new one, and the base is still there under the nettles by the compost — and he would come down in August and eat one off the vine with salt from his waistcoat pocket and tell me it was the best tomato in the county, which it was not. Everything of his he said that about — the tomatoes, the yew before he ruined it, the pear — and I have thought since that it was not boasting, but a man telling you what he had decided to be content with.

I had a wife, and will put that down once. From the village, she was, and we married in my fourth year here and she died in my seventeenth, in the winter, and there were no children, and after that I came up to the garden earlier and went home later, and the family did not remark on it, which was a kindness, and the only kind I would have accepted.

The boy's tree is a rowan. He put it in himself when he was six, with his grandmother watching from the bench, and he dug the hole too shallow and set it crooked and firmed it with one foot, and when they had gone in I took it up and put it in again properly, and I have kept it straight with a stake for twenty-two years, and he believes he planted it, and he did.

The first pear comes at the end of August.

The old gentleman took the first one off that tree every year himself and ate it standing there and told me it was the best tree in the county. I have taken the first one every September since he died, and eaten it standing there, and not told anyone. Not a good pear. A Doyenné, and the tree was too far in under the wall and never had the early light, and the fruit was always a week behind what it should have been and never sweetened right, and he ate it every year as though it had. Three on the tree this year, and I took one, and it was what it has always been.

I lift the dahlias after the first frost blackens them, which is the right time and not before. The boy does the lifting and I do the labels, because the labels are the part that matters and he cannot read my hand. The long bed I cut back and let the phlox stand for the birds. The lilies I cut down to the ground and mulch them and put a cane in at each corner so the boy does not walk on it, and I have told him why, which is that there are things under there.

And I keep the tin.

It is in the shed on the shelf above the bench, a biscuit tin from the old lady's kitchen, and it has in it a paper for every bed and tree in this garden — what is there, what was there before it, what it was put in for and by whom and when. I began it the year I understood I would not be here for all of it. Not for the family; they do not know it exists, and I have thought about whether to tell them and decided not. For the next man. He will find it when he goes looking for the twine, and sit down on the bench in the shed and read it, and then he will know what he has.

The pear came down in October.

I had the tree man for it; it was past what I could do and past what I would let the boy try. Dead at the crown three years, dying for ten. Seventy years where it stood and down in four hours. The boy and I logged it and it is in the woodshed now and it will burn well; pear does. I said so to the family, and they said that was fine, and I do not think they understood me.

The ground where it stood I left bare. You do not plant into a stump-hole the same season; the roots want a winter to begin to go. I had an idea for it, and the idea would keep.

In November I had a letter.

From whom I will not say; it is not my business to put her name in a garden book, and she would not want it, and the family does not know the name and will not learn it from me. A short letter, and she wrote it herself, and her hand is like her mother's, which I had not expected and which I had to sit down for.

One letter before that, eleven years ago, when she was twenty-nine. She had been told by then, by someone, and had found me, and wrote to ask whether it was true that there was a bed of lilies. I wrote back that there was. That was the whole of it both ways, and I have the letter in the tin with the papers, where the next man will find it and not know what it is.

She is well, and has a house in a town I have never been to, and in the spring there is to be a child.

Winter there is little to do and I have done it. Fallen wood out of the far hedge. Apples pruned on a dry day — the Bramley will fruit this year, and I will not tell them, and they will be surprised, and that is something. By the gate the rose is a stick, as it is every December; fifty-three Decembers I have looked at it and thought that is the year, and it has not been, and I expect it will outlast me, and I would like it to.

I cleaned and oiled the tools in January, which I have done fifty-three winters, and the boy came in while I was doing it and stood and watched and did not ask, and I let him, and after a while I gave him the spade and the rag and he did that one.

In February I went to the nursery.

A good many things I had thought about for that ground, and it was always going to be a pear — a Doyenné, the old gentleman's variety, which I have not seen in a nursery in twenty years and had to send for it, and it came on a Tuesday and I heeled it in in the shed.

The ground was workable from the first of March this year, and the rose came through on the sixth, five shoots, and the snowdrops were over.

The hole I have had open since the thaw, and the position I have thought about carefully. The old tree was too far in toward the house; it was put in before the wall went up and it never had the early light, which is why the fruit was always what it was and why he ate it anyway. I have moved the hole four yards east. From there it will clear the wall by the middle of May and have the sun from first thing until the oak takes it at noon, and in September the fruit will ripen on the side that faces the gate.

I put in what the ground wants and more than it wants, because a tree that goes in well will stand seventy years and a tree that goes in badly will stand ten, and I will not be here to put in another.

The boy came on the Saturday and held the stake, and it is in, and what it is for is written and in the tin with the others.

I have put something in the ground for everything that has happened to this family, and they have let me, and after the first twenty years they stopped seeing it was me. The rose for the old lady's mother. The oak for the boy's father. The cherry the children leaned. The bench, the corner, the yew with the gap in it. The lilies, which were for what they were for. They walk past the marks every day and think the garden remembers them.

No birth in this family in twenty-eight years, and not going to be one; that is what the village says and what the house believes. Except that there was, forty years ago, in Switzerland, and the only thing in this garden that knew was a bed of lilies by the wall that has no business in the soil.

And now there is to be another, and it has a tree, and the tree is where she will get the morning.

I mowed round the corner. I oiled the bench. I put the stakes in Miss Hallam's bed, because the lilies are up.