

The Garden



Royal
Horticultural
Society

June 2018

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ROY LANCASTER VISITS...

The Plant Specialist



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A nursery near Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire, stocked with an enticing range of desirable perennials and set within beautifully planted gardens, provides a memorable day out for Roy

Author: **Roy Lancaster VMH**, plantsman and author.

Photography: **Tim Sandall**

At the beginning of August last year I had the pleasure of visiting The Plant Specialist at Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire whose specialities, herbaceous perennials (hardy and half hardy), grasses and bulbs are clear on arrival. This nursery combines a sales area with plants on benches or in low standing-out frames with a series of mixed plantings of informal design, accessed by winding gravel paths. I was impressed, firstly, by the variety of plants and sheer audacity of flower colour and foliage combinations; and secondly, by the number of striking and desirable plants in the garden that were mirrored in the extensive sales area.

Warm reception

I was greeted by owner Sean Walter who emerged from a cosy reception area. Sean was born in Durban in South Africa, and had been encouraged in plantsmanship from a young age by his mother, first developing an interest in tropical plants before eventually being persuaded to >>

travel and 'see the world'. This is how he came to arrive in Britain and found himself working at a garden centre. His gardening education was furthered by visits to key gardens, especially the walled garden at Hadspen House in Somerset during the tenure of Nori and Sandra Pope in whom Sean found inspiration.

Sean had a burgeoning desire to start his own specialist nursery with an emphasis on unusual perennials and grasses in an informal garden landscape. This reached fruition when he met his now business partner Keith Pounder, who at the time was head gardener for author and poet Roald Dahl and his wife Felicity. Keith shared Sean's idea of starting a nursery, but first they consulted Felicity Dahl, now a widow, about their plans. She, to their delight, answered, 'I don't mind what you do so long as you always look after my garden.' As luck would have it, in 1998 a site for the nursery became available to them when the owners of a 1.8ha (4½ acre) area of allotments on the village edge offered them an acre on a long lease. Since then the pair have managed to both expand and purchase the site.

Supporting them in their endeavours is a close-knit team of part-time staff and volunteers including their wives, whose hard work and enthusiasm – not to mention their skills – has played a huge part in the nursery's success.

Keith brings a wealth of practical experience to the business and was keen to point out that, being on green belt, the nursery must observe planning laws. 'Everything we sell is grown here, nothing is bought in for immediate sale.'

The Plant Specialist

7 Whitefield Lane, Great Missenden,
Buckinghamshire HP16 0BH;
01494 866650; theplantspecialist.co.uk

Open: April–October,
10am–5pm Wed–Sat,
10am–4pm Sun & Bank Holiday Mondays.

Access: wheelchair accessible.

Sean Walter designed the National Theatre terraces, London; see August 2016, pp60–61.

'I was conscious of and occasionally distracted by myriad perennials waving at me...'

The sales area of the nursery (right) is surrounded by impressive gardens. *Geranium 'Joy'* and *Calamintha nepeta* subsp. *nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' (below) form a pleasing association.



Naturally, small quantities of new stock is purchased as plugs for growing on and for subsequent propagation.

Marvellous mallows

As interesting as I found Sean and Keith's story, I was conscious of and occasionally distracted by myriad perennials waving at me in the background. My tour began with

a splendid, tall, branching perennial or sub-shrub to 1.5m (5ft) with small hoary leaves and long, interrupted racemes of small, brilliant tangerine-orange, yellow-eyed flowers. *Sphaeralcea incana* is a particular favourite of Sean's even though, believing it to be less than hardy, he chose to plant it in a large metal tank of well-drained compost. In the event it has proved 'a winner', flowering from the end of May onwards, and has performed reliably for years. It is not the only member of the mallow family grown here; I was pleased to see closely related *Anisodonteia* 'El Rayo', more willowy-stemmed and elegant in habit than the other with larger, greener leaves and freely borne flowers of pink with a darker centre. Sean was excited in describing the merits of this plant, which he says in sheltered gardens can continue flowering from summer into winter. 'I cannot recommend it highly enough.' The typical species originates in the Drakensburg mountains of South Africa.

In one bed I admired the attractive, hazy effect projected by a combination of *Geranium 'Joy'*, pale pink flowers with darker veins, and *Calamintha nepeta* »



subsp. *nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' whose tiny blue-tinted flowers are produced in prodigious numbers, providing a reliable and continuous supply of nectar for bees, hoverflies and butterflies.

Bees, especially buff-tailed bumblebees, were also active on the crowded lilac flowerheads of a low-growing and decidedly ornamental onion (*Allium*) species that had a label bearing two names: *A. angulosum* and *A. senescens*. Sean has a policy of keeping names under which he obtains plants until someone proves to him they are otherwise – which in the case of this *Allium* might not be simple, judging by the many new hybrids and selections appearing in cultivation involving these and other species.

Sean then pointed out to me a magnificent clump up to 75cm (2½ft) of *Agapanthus* 'Castle of Mey', another of his favourites. 'It is one of the first to flower and is easy and hardy, and I love its smoky-blue flowers.'



Agapanthus and *Sedum* in stock beds at the nursery (left), where plants are assessed and bulked up. The sales area includes a shade house (below). Roy and Sean (below left) examine charming perennial *Anisodonte* 'El Rayo'.

Sorting the shade

One of the most frequently asked questions, Sean finds, is 'what can I grow in shade?'. We had stopped to admire a plant used in just such a situation in several beds throughout the garden – here, dramatically, in the relatively heavy shade of an apple tree. '*Eurybia schreberi* is a perfect candidate for such places,' Sean says, and I could not but agree. 'It is not a showy plant but it does a job and the bold, deep green foliage is a perfect foil for its sprays of white daisy flowers, from June to September. It is far superior in my opinion to the more commonly grown *Eurybia divaricata*.'



I was pleased to see an old plant friend of mine, *Chamaenerion dodonaei*, in several beds. Its airy clumps of willow stems up to 60cm (2ft) are clothed with narrow leaves and adorned with rose-pink, slender-stalked, star-shaped flowers. I first came to admire this plant on the rock garden when a student at Cambridge University Botanic Gardens in the early 1960s and I have never forgotten it. It was in the same garden that I first saw *Artemisia lactiflora*, a Chinese introduction by plant hunter EH Wilson, its creamy white flower plumes so much more attractive than

those of our common native mugwort (*A. vulgaris*). I was thrilled therefore to see here a much-improved, milky-white-flowered selection in *A. lactiflora* 'Elfenbein', beautifully associated with the pale yellow-flowered, branching spikes of *Veratrum album* var. *flavum*, an inspired planting. Not far away Sean pointed out a group of *Artemisia* 'Rosenschleier' whose flowerheads were tinted 'a distinct shade of old rose'.

For some time I strolled through the garden enjoying personal favourites such as *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Emmanuel Lepage' and that striking double, red-flowered form of soapwort *Saponaria officinalis* 'Rubra Plena' while making frequent



I was pleased to see an old plant friend of mine..'

stops simply to survey the swaths of colour provided by bold plantings of kniphofias, crocosmias, heleniums, dark-flowered sedums and frothy white umbels. One speciality is *Sanguisorba*, with many selections on offer here. There was also a large shade house containing a rich selection of hardy ferns that I found particularly interesting, offering a cool retreat on a hot summer's day.

Before departing, I had to decide on one plant to remember this experience. After much ferreting around in the sales area I found *Gladiolus* 'Ruby', a choice late-flowering perennial with dusky red flowers I have twice grown but lost to winter wet. Would it be third time lucky? ○



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Plant Specialist specialities

- 1 *Sphaeralcea incana* bears tall stems of orange flowers throughout summer.
- 2 *Anisodonteia* 'El Rayo' is a slender-stemmed, free flowering perennial.
- 3 An *Allium* that is prolifically late flowering, but as yet unidentified.
- 4 *Chamaenerion dodonaei*, a refined willowherb for a sunny gravel garden.
- 5 *Eurybia schreberi* makes a great choice for shade with its glowing white daisies.
- 6 *Saponaria officinalis* 'Rubra Plena' bears masses of vibrant double flowers.
- 7 *Veratrum album* var. *flavum* backed by *Artemisia lactiflora* 'Elfenbein'.
- 8 *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Emmanuel Lepage', a fine ornamental grass.



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