

Local Hero

Alison Sparshatt left a life in engineering to start a nursery in the Welsh hills. *Noel Kingsbury* discovers the bright light behind The Walled Garden Treberfydd

“I had no formal gardening experience,” Alison Sparshatt freely admits. “I was looking for a small business to buy, and there it was, a walled garden near where I live, with a derelict nursery.” Nurseries are notoriously difficult businesses to make a go of, but Alison seems to have done it. Four years down the line, The Walled Garden Treberfydd, in the Brecon Beacons, is one of the most distinctive, characterful and really joyful nurseries I know.

Alison seems to have discovered a winning formula, fostering a creatively bohemian atmosphere in the old potting sheds of what was once the kitchen garden of the neighbouring big house. At the heart of it is a range of plants that are genuinely local, in that they are sourced from nearby gardens, “I’m 600 feet up, and many of my customers are at 1,000 feet,” Alison says. “If they buy plants from me they know they will do well.”

“I take the attitude that I would rather have an unnamed variety of something that does well locally than something new but untried.” This is the pragmatism of someone who has had another life, has come to gardening with fresh eyes, and has a desire to make things work. “I have an analytical and engineering background,” she says. “I know how much every pot costs, how much the compost is. For me it is all part of a logical process.”

Alison says of herself and Pam, her “brilliant” part-time worker, that they like to challenge “accepted ways of doing things”. When she took on the lease from the former business it came with the right to a stand at the Royal Welsh Show. “I took £10,000 in one weekend,” she says, “but it didn’t drive a single customer to the nursery, so we never did it again.” And so she released herself from one of the great treadmills of the small nursery owner, choosing instead to have customers come to her.

Analytical Alison may be, but the walled garden has allowed a creative side to flourish. The sales areas for her range of perennials are sandwiched between display beds, so there is a real garden atmosphere and people can see what plants are like when they mature. A passionate

Right Alison Sparshatt.
Below *Eurybia divaricata* (formerly *Aster*) ‘Eastern Star’.

MY TOP 5 PLANTS

1 *Maianthemum racemosum*

Sophisticated and elegant fragrant spring flowers.

2 *Valeriana officinalis*

Statuesque old-fashioned herb with an arresting scent.

3 *Leucojum* ‘Gravetye Giant’

Later, taller and longer lasting than snowdrops, fabulous en masse.

4 *Eurybia* ‘Eastern Star’

White, star-shaped flowers in late summer and autumn.

5 *Helleborus argutifolius*

Striking metallic evergreen foliage.



“When I bought the nursery I did have to give up water skiing

visitor to galleries, the visual arts are clearly a big part of who she is. “When I worked in London, I went to hundreds of shows, and all over Europe, too.” Indeed, the nursery does put on shows by local artists and, pursuing the analogy, she says she thinks that “putting plants together is basically curating”, something that from some lips might sound precious or pompous, but not from hers.

Alison is famous locally for her energy, but there is no doubt that it is first and foremost hard work that has made the business a success. With such a demanding job, I was interested to know what she has had to sacrifice. “I gave up motorbiking when I had three dogs,” she says, “but I walk them every morning, and that is when I do my thinking. When I bought the nursery I did give up water skiing,” she adds.

Close to Llangorse Lake, in a beautiful corner of south Wales, but with no prospect of passing traffic, marketing the nursery has been something of a triumph. Leaflets promoting The Walled Garden Treberfydd can be found everywhere locally. Following their directions will take the curious to an attractive new model for the nursery trade. ■

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