







TEXT CAROLINE DONALD | PHOTOGRAPHS SABINA RÜBER

# Growth industry

A horticultural novice when she purchased a South Wales plant nursery, Alison Sparshatt specialises in hardy and often unusual perennials, showcasing them in harmonious combinations in beautiful beds and borders



OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The beautiful double flowers of shrub rose 'Constance Spry' are heavily scented. Delicate *Dahlia merckii* with daisy-like *Erigeron annuus*. The single blooms of *Rosa glauca* are set off by purple-flushed foliage. *Lilium martagon*

THIS PAGE Pale blue *Amsonia tabernaemontana*, white *Leucanthemum vulgare* and violet blue *Geranium x magnificentum* provide pools of colour below multi-stemmed *Elaeagnus umbellata*



If Alison Sparshatt had not seen a plant nursery for sale in a Hay-on-Wye estate agent's window as she went for coffee one morning 10 years ago, her life might have followed a different path. A chartered accountant at the time, but keen to be her own boss, she was on the hunt for a business to buy. 'I was looking at all sorts of things,' she says, confessing that, with no qualifications, experience or even an interest in gardening, running a horticultural enterprise was not on her radar. She had, however, watched her mother create a series of gardens as the family moved from posting to posting when her father was in the navy. 'I thought, it can't be that hard.'

The nursery was situated in the former one-and-a-bit-acre walled kitchen garden of Treberfydd, an estate on a quiet road between the Brecon Beacons (now renamed Bannau Brycheiniog) and the Black Mountains, and specialised in growing bedding plants for councils and hanging baskets. It had seen better days, but that did not deter the intrepid Alison: 'The situation was so beautiful that I decided to turn it into a garden and use that as my shop.'

Today, those looking for cheery bedding plants will have to go elsewhere, as Alison's speciality is hardy and often unusual perennials that can withstand whatever the Welsh weather throws at them. The beautiful, thriving garden she has created at Treberfydd is itself an example of overcoming such adversities, as it sits on a north-facing slope, where frosts linger, the sun hardly comes over the horizon in winter and high winds periodically howl through the space.

Rather than displaying rows of plant pots in alphabetical order, as in a traditional nursery, Alison has filled beds and borders with striking form and colour combinations, to show what will grow well and what works with what, in a series of environments. 'You can't see what a plant is going to look like when it's in a pot or how big it will get,' she says, pointing to a tricky spot, where *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Taurus' and *Bidens aurea* 'Hannay's Lemon Drop' grow well. 'It's a steep bank with rubbish soil, but they are thuggish enough to out-compete anything else.' Should visitors be inspired, they can find pots of the plants used in the scheme beside the bed.

A 30.5 x 18-metre glasshouse was a victim of Storm Dennis in 2020, but its footprint remains. Alison has made the most of the compacted clay soil in this area - 'It's baked dry in summer, with zero nutrients' - which is now a happy home to the likes of panicum, molinia and calamagrostis grasses, along with echinaceas, *Verbena bonariensis*, geums, monarda, Japanese anemones and *Knautia macedonica*.

Though open from March, the garden really takes off in May, reaching a climax in October. Dutch plantsman and designer Piet Oudolf is an obvious influence, and Alison has attended workshops with experts such as Jekka McVicar (herbs) and Neil Lucas at Knoll Gardens in Dorset (grasses), as well as Marina Christopher at Phoenix Perennial Plants and Derry Watkins of Special Plants Nursery to learn about propagation techniques. She visits as many gardens as she can to 'steal ideas' (others might say 'for inspiration').

Her enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge are unwaning. 'I was 53 when I bought this place and I have learned more in the past 10 years than I had in the 30 before,' she says. 'It is never ending.' It was far more than a cup of coffee she came back with on that serendipitous trip to Hay-on-Wye □

Walled Garden Treberfydd Plant Nursery is open from March to November: [walledgardentreberfydd.com](http://walledgardentreberfydd.com)



ABOVE *Gunnera manicata* leaves and pale panicles of *Rodgersia aesculifolia* frame a sculpture made from concrete blocks from the storm-damaged glasshouse

BELOW The structure of another old glasshouse creates a pergola for roses and clematis over canals where waterlilies and *Iris pseudacorus* flourish



ABOVE FROM LEFT Pretty herbaceous perennial *Geranium nodosum* 'Julie's Velvet' thrives in a shady corner. Raised beds, at the opposite end of the old glasshouse structure to the canals, provide free-draining soil conditions for magenta *Salvia microphylla* 'Cerro Potosi', *Salvia officinalis* 'Purpurascens' and drifts of white *Centranthus ruber* 'Snowcloud'

BELOW FROM LEFT In a shaded area, *Prunus x subhirtella* 'Autumnalis' emerges from a sea of *Luzula nivea*, with plum *Astrantia major* 'Rubra', purple *Nepeta kubanica* and feathery *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Goldtau' in the foreground. Yellow *Opopanax chironium*, cream spires of *Verbascum chaixii* 'Album' and inky *Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape' are showcased with herbs in raised beds

