



GREAT BRITISH GROWERS

“Remarkable plants don’t have to be difficult to grow”

On the side of a windswept hill in South Wales, Alison Sparshatt is growing an enchanting abundance of uncommon perennials at Walled Garden Treberfydd, finds Emma Kendell

Photography: Jason Ingram



The one-acre nursery sits within the walls of what was once the kitchen garden of neighbouring Treberfydd House

Nursery info

Name: Walled Garden Treberfydd.

Location: Llangasty, Brecon, Powys LD3 7PX.

Started: 2013.

Plants: Hardy herbaceous perennials grown in Wales, specialising in those that are structural, unusual, edible, herbal or fragrant. Cultivars for cold, wet conditions, including a wide range of grasses and late-season flowering plants.

Customers: Garden lovers.

Opening times: Weds–Sat, 10am–4pm, March–October. Additional opening some bank holidays – check website for details.

Web: walledgardentreberfydd.com

Social media: @walledgardentreberfydd (Instagram).

Email: alison@walledgardentreberfydd.com

Turning off the main road towards Walled Garden Treberfydd, it’s obvious which of the local residents shop there – from these properties, riots of blooms rampage over hedges that separate gardens from the steep, sunken, single-track road. Yet the architectural tangle that grows within the listed stone walls of the nursery itself surpasses expectation. Past a pink cloud of *Althaea cannabina*, violet flowers of *Vernonia arkansana* bob against the blue sky, and the curious shapes of *Chelone obliqua* vie for attention alongside the bright yellow hues of perennial sunflower *Helianthus decapetalus*.

“Remarkable plants don’t have to be difficult to grow,” says owner Alison Sparshatt. “I sell some very beautiful, unusual plants, but they’re all straightforward to grow. I don’t have time for prima donnas – if it’s too precious, it goes.”

Most are hardy perennials, though here that »

Nursery owner Alison Sparshatt holds a tray of *Crocsmia* × *crocsmiiflora* ‘Norwich Canary’





Tall yellow *Helianthus giganteus* 'Sheila's Sunshine' and pink *Eutrochium maculatum* (Atropurpureum Group) 'Purple Bush' RHS stand out by the nursery office



Under the watchful eye of labrador Shelby, Alison waters *Salvia microphylla* 'Cerro Potosi' RHS and *S. greggii* 'Stormy Pink'. Behind are the chimneys of Treberfydd House

description feels like an understatement: tough as old boots might be more apt. The north-facing nursery sits on heavy clay soil, 180m above sea level between the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains, and is regularly enveloped in freezing winter fogs that drift from nearby Llangorse Lake. "The walls can create quite a vortex when it's windy," says Alison. "And the greenhouses are unheated, so they eventually reach the same temperature as outside, which can be -14°C in January." Impressive, then, that this beautifully curated range of plants is entirely propagated on site from scratch, using divisions, cuttings and collected seed. "Selling plants that will survive is the ultimate in sustainability," says Alison. "I grow all the plants on outside so they're strong, and I love helping people find solutions that will really thrive in a particular space."

The walled one-acre nursery is laid out as a garden with sections displaying what can be grown in different conditions, including raised beds that provide more sharply drained soil. Rather than one dedicated sales area, several discreet bays of one- and two-litre pots are tucked close to relevant planting schemes. "People ask what they can grow in a damp, shady bed, and I can show them," says Alison. The selection almost leaves you craving such a tricky spot

– maroon stems of *Kirengeshoma palmata* have yet to open their buttermilk blooms, but the mound of shapely pale leaves is already striking against the near-black foliage of *Actaea simplex* (Atropurpurea Group) 'Brunette' RHS. Recommended: Award of Garden Merit (RHS). White flowers of *Anemone* × *hybrida* 'Honorine Jobert' RHS unabashedly skip through the lot.

A few metres away, an immersive, zero-maintenance zone is block-planted with the horizontal leaves of *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Lavendelturm' RHS against vertical stems of *Calamagrostis* × *acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster' RHS. It's spiked with the blood-red blooms of *Bistorta amplexicaulis* 'Blackfield' RHS and softened with a fairy ring of *Echinacea pallida*. "I haven't improved this soil, which is compacted from having been under a greenhouse for years,"

“Seasonality is important – we need to embrace ebb and flow, not fight it”

Alison says. "Yet this combination is easy to look after – just cut the lot to the ground in February."

Alison's creativity is evident everywhere you look. "I enjoy putting plants together – it's a bit like playing Battleship. When I'm drawing out a plan on paper I visualise the height, colour and how the plants will live together through the seasons. It's wonderful when the reality is even better than I imagined." *Clematis heracleifolia* 'Cassandra' RHS spills in all directions, undulating waves of its deep blue sepals sloshing around the holly-like leaves of neighbouring *Itea ilicifolia* RHS. A water rill that sprang a leak has been reimagined as a neat aisle of well-behaved blooms – "non-floppy plants to grow in a narrow border along a path," explains Alison. *Satureja montana* (winter savoury) is being trialled as an alternative to *Buxus* (box), and concrete supports from a greenhouse that was toppled by 2020's Storm Dennis have been recycled into a Brâncuși-esque garden sculpture.

The total is effortlessly elegant, so expertly edited, that it's surprising to learn Alison came to this industry by chance, after spotting an advert for a trade nursery lease 13 years ago. "I had no intention of going into horticulture at all! I was just nosing in an estate agent's window," she says. But, post-50 and tired of her London commute and the corporate world of chartered accountancy, Alison says the idea of a different life appealed. "The nursery was pretty run down, and I looked at how the books stacked up," she says. "But my decision wasn't about money – I'd had enough expensive meals and travel, I just needed to earn a basic living. The critical factor was that the nursery was three miles from home." »

Alison's late-summer stars



Veronicastrum virginicum 'Lavendelturm' RHS
"With whorls of foliage, self-supporting 2m-high stems and long seedheads that last all winter."



Helianthus giganteus 'Sheila's Sunshine'
"These clump-forming daisy-like flowers are joyous, bobbing about on 2m-high stems."



Salvia uliginosa RHS
"A contrary herbaceous perennial that needs moist soil in summer and good drainage in winter – but it's worth it for those clear blue flowers."



Vernonia arkansana 'Mammuth' RHS
"A Quality Street-colour favourite! It's clump-forming with long-lasting, late-season flowers."



Althaea cannabina
"Such a fresh pink, it's very structural and flowers all the way from midsummer through to early autumn."



An old greenhouse frame is now a sculptural feature over decommissioned water rills awash with *Salvia patens* RHS®



All plants are propagated on site using divisions, cuttings and collected seed, then grown on outside to bolster resilience

With no gardening training, Alison went to talks and attended workshops. “I didn’t want to learn everything, just what I needed,” she says. “It was hard, exciting and hands-on – I learned more in the first six years than I had in the previous 25.” Her plan: to grow plants she found interesting, which is a great many – the number of different cultivars propagated here now tops 700. “I like plants that are structural, fragrant, elegant or unusual,” she says. And I love plants that die gracefully, like *Glycyrrhiza yunnanensis*, with its spiky seedheads.”

Green credentials

The nursery is peat free, uses no chemicals, sprays or pesticides, and wildlife is welcomed. All plants are propagated on site and grown on in recyclable pots to be fully hardy, and all green waste is composted. Customers are also encouraged to return pots and labels for re-use.



In August, collecting seed is keeping Alison busy, and in the old potting shed, twine lines are pegged with brown paper bags marked with scribbled Latin names. Some plants are left to self-seed, “and I simply dig up the seedlings that are trying the hardest to live”, she says.

Plenty is left to feed wildlife, too, such as the spherical seedheads of *Cephalaria gigantea* (giant scabious) snagging on sun-bleached teasel, and the *Phlomis russeliana* RHS® planted around a huge stone urn. “Charms of goldfinches gather to eat the seed all winter,” says Alison. Of course, there’s a pairing of plants at play to ensure the spent stems stay looking good, with fountains of *Helianthus salicifolius* foliage promising the cheery yellows proffered by *Achillea filipendulina* ‘Cloth of Gold’ RHS® will continue into autumn.

“Seasonality is important – we need to embrace ebb and flow in our gardens rather than fight it,” Alison says. “In winter, the sun stays behind the hill and I stay at home, reading books by the fire. Then in spring, the garden starts all over again and by summer – well, just look!”

Figs ripen against the warm walls, juicy enough to eat from the tree. Creased Welsh poppy petals shine among the deep purple stems of self-seeded *Verbena officinalis* ‘Bampton’ that crowd every cranny. Startled thrushes scold as Shelby, Alison’s black labrador, zooms out of the greenhouse clutching a stolen tomato in his jaws.

“I have a pretty good life,” says Alison, telling of the hare who visits the garden to have her litters, and the grass snakes that sunbathe atop the compost bins. Customers are welcomed just as warmly to this oasis, with benches, a kettle and mismatched crockery encouraging them to linger. “This isn’t a place to rush in and out of,” says Alison. “People come here in a good mood. If not, they’re smiling by the time they go.” ○

Emma Kendell is a garden writer, editor and author