

Gardens

Dutch horticulturist puts on a variety show

De Hessenhof nursery uses traditional methods to produce a vast diversity of plants



Hans and Miranda Kramer at De Hessenhof nursery © Maayke de Ridder

SEPTEMBER 8, 2017 by: Jonny Bruce

The Netherlands may not have the grand gardens of Britain but when it comes to selling plants, few do it so well. In the 17th century, Haarlem, west of Amsterdam, was the epicentre of tulipomania and despite the infamous crash of that first market bubble the Netherlands is still the biggest player in international floriculture. Tulipomania may have passed but as of 2015, 77 per cent of all flower bulbs traded worldwide came from this country.

Business is concentrated along its coasts, where rich soils and maritime climates have nurtured one of the country's most profitable industries. Far from this hub of international trade is the small town of Ede, known for its chicken farms and where the soil is so poor that sand dunes erupt among pine trees in the local woods. However, hidden behind high beech hedges and rows of oaks lies De Hessenhof, a specialist perennial nursery that over 35 years has built an international reputation.

Hans Kramer started selling plants as a teenager from a stall on the street outside his home. In 1981 he began renting one of his grandfather's fields and by 1994 had colonised most of what had been the family farm. Within this 5-acre site Kramer and his wife Miranda have amassed a

collection of almost 7,000 varieties of plants. Economies of scale mean that the industrial nurseries on the coast tend to maximise production of a narrow selection of popular and easily produced plants. There is a reason why there are so many day lilies in this world.

In contrast, De Hessenhof depends on traditional techniques to produce the diversity of plants displayed in its vast catalogue. These techniques involve propagating plants from seed, cuttings and division, using plants grown on site in an area referred to as the Mother Beds. This field holds thousands of different varieties, laid out in old-fashioned rows of varying quantities depending on the propagative method required. A plant grown from seed may only require a single mother plant whereas plants produced by division need many.



A greenhouse at De Hessenhof © Maayke de Ridder



Miranda Kramer © Maayke de Ridder

As well as providing material for propagation, growing plants in the open ground allows the Kramers to assess their garden value better, compared with the nurseries that are increasingly turning to pot culture. At the most basic, it is the intimate knowledge provided by propagating and growing all the plants themselves that is the key to De Hessenhof's success.

However, to be competitive in such a market requires more than plant knowledge and traditional techniques. There is also an innovative spirit and adherence to strict principles that have helped this nursery carve out its niche. An example of this is the compost in which the plants are potted: it is almost 100 per cent leaf mould. About 25 years ago Kramer struck a deal with the local council allowing it to dump the leaves from the cemeteries and parks of Ede at the back of his nursery. In exchange, the council would ensure a good quality of leaves (though crisp packets and bottle tops are not uncommon in the pots) and a machine to turn the leaves twice a year.



Open ground allows the Kramers to assess plants' garden value © Maayke de Ridder



The compost is almost 100 per cent leaf mould © Maayke de Ridder

Not only do plants seem to thrive in it but this organic, peat-free, recycled substrate allows De Hessenhof to claim unusually high ecological standards. It is an unfortunate paradox that the world of horticulture is not that “green”. Whereas younger generations are attracted by a new environmentalism, many traditional gardeners cling to their spray guns. Extensive media coverage has raised awareness about the impact of agriculture’s use of harmful chemicals such as neo-nicotinoids and industrial horticulture is no better. Not only are the glasshouses

dependent on vast amounts of chemicals but they are also incredibly demanding of energy for constant lighting and climate control.

De Hessenhof has been certified organic since 2009. In conventional nurseries plants grown under glass with ample food and water bulk up fast but their soft growth is susceptible to attack from aphids and other pests. To keep these at bay growers are forced to rely on chemical controls. This mollicoddling continues on into the garden centre but abruptly ends when the average gardener pops the plant into his or her garden. The shameful part is that most gardeners then blame themselves for the subsequent death of said plant. The Kramers assert that by growing their plants more slowly, exposed to the elements and without excessive chemicals the plants are inherently stronger, a claim seemingly supported by their loyal customers.



Hans Kramer © Maayke de Ridder



The Kramers' dogs: Bliksem, Floor and Frida © Maayke de Ridder

As industrial horticulture becomes dominated by fewer, increasingly large, companies there is a danger of narrowing the range of available plants. More and more plants are mass-produced by micro-propagation. This system can turn a small amount of material into thousands of genetically identical plants. It has revolutionised plant production but it is only financially viable when plants are produced at a high volume. The plants that do make it into micro-propagation are then disproportionately cheaper, which encourages garden centres and nurseries to stock them often regardless of garden worth. It is this ability to resist homogeny that makes specialist nurseries so important to horticulture.

Growers like the Kramers are vital to the industry but their knowledge, built up over a lifetime, is fragile. The skills to grow and propagate a collection such as at De Hessenhof should, like the plants, be developed slowly. It is vital to encourage a new generation of nurserymen to ensure this knowledge is not lost.

Jonny Bruce is a horticulturalist who trained in the UK but since autumn 2016 has worked at De Hessenhof

Photographs: Maayke de Ridder

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't copy articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

