

A garden of perennial favourites

When it comes to stocking the display gardens at De Hessenhof in the Netherlands, the owners are spoilt for choice – they grow 6,000 outstanding perennials at their specialist nursery

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In brief

NAME Kwekerij De Hessenhof.
WHAT Display garden and test beds for specialist nursery.
WHERE Central Netherlands.
SIZE 1.5 acres.
CLIMATE Typical north European climate with cold damp winters.
SOIL Sandy clay.

The

Dutch nursery industry has a reputation for large-scale commercial productivity, but if you visit the Netherlands, you will find many small specialist nurseries catering for enthusiasts. De Hessenhof is one of the best, a place where the gardener will be lost for hours, their location among stock beds and display garden marked by whoops of joy or surprise. Hans Kramer and his wife Miranda have a garden and nursery with an extraordinary range of good plants, many of which are not available elsewhere. They run it with the kind of efficient professionalism for which Dutch nurseries are renowned.

Hans started early, as he recalls: "There used to be an old man in the neighbourhood who grew herbs for homeopathy. I had a Saturday job with him as a teenager and it opened a whole new world to me. He told me everything about the plants. If I learnt a Latin name, I could take a piece of the plant home." Leaving school at 16 to study horticulture should have been no surprise to anyone who knew him, but his decision to set up on his own as a nurseryman at the age of just 19 was a bold one. "That was in 1981," he recalls. "I grew a small perennial assortment but also there was a fashion for heathers and so I grew them too, and herbs." What British gardeners recognise as 'plantmanship' clearly took an early hold, as Hans recalls that "right from the beginning I was adventurous and got seeds from botanical garden seed exchanges".

Plant hunting trips

A holiday in 1982 took Hans to England where he visited Great Dixter, the garden of the late Christopher Lloyd. "I bought the wild form of *Phlox paniculata* and a *Clematis henricifolia*." He also met Elizabeth Strangman, renowned for her passion for spring-flowering woodland plants, who ran Washfield Nursery in Kent. She and Hans went plant hunting in eastern Europe several times in the 1990s. Since then, Hans has made occasional collecting trips, including a recent one to Bosnia.

The four-acre nursery site includes around 6,000 species and cultivars of plants, of which Hans says "we usually have around 2,500 available. We do not buy anything in, so everything is hardy here. I grow mostly species rather than

continued on page 62

De Hessenhof's garden displays some of the nursery's specialities including *helenium*, *geranium*, *hellebores* and *perdicaria*.



Creative clash

1 *Helium 'RedArmy'* has flowers in deep red with almost black cones. 2 *Helium 'Mien Ruys'* grows to 90cm in height, and has orange flowers, with a long flowering period starting in July. 3 *Agapanthus 'Avignon'* is shown off by the orange and red *heliums* behind. 4 A haze of pink *Astrantia* cultivars in the front reminds us of their long-flowering season, starting in June and coming to a close as these *agapanthus* come to their peak.



Trial of seedlings

"This photograph was taken in the back of our trial field of seedlings and hybrids," says Hans. The blue of the *agapanthus* and *agastache* hybrid seedlings provide weeks of mid to late summer colour. Form is provided by the flowers of the *Echinacea* contrasting with the white *Persicaria*, whose flowers appear to dance through the air. 1 *Agastache* hybrid seedlings. 2 *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Alba'. 3 *Echinacea purpurea* selected seedlings. 4 *Agapanthus* hybrid seedlings.



Black and white

1 A still unnamed selection of my black-leaved *Actaea simplex* breeding programme," says Hans of a plant that at only one metre tall is practically dwarf among those moisture-loving tall perennials. 2 To the right, and picking up the pale theme, is *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Beth Chatto', the last *miscanthus* to be named by the veteran German breeder Ernst Pagels (1913-2007).



Firework display

The blues of the *agapanthus* contrast with the scarlet of *crocus* – both plants grow happily at the nursery although they originated in South Africa. 1 At the back of the border is an unnamed *Eupatorium fistulosum* seedling. 2 *Orange Helium 'Mien Ruys'* and *H. 'RedArmy'* grow together continuing the blue/orange theme of complementary colours. 3 *Agapanthus 'Septemberhermel'*. 4 *Agapanthus 'Davos'*. 5 *A. Avignon*, in pale blue. 6 *Crocus x crocosmiflora* 'Zal Tan'.



8 of nurseryman Hans Kramer's favourite plants

- 1 *Actaea cordifolia* 'Blickfang'
"The forgotten Cimicifuga," says Hans of this robust old German variety, which reaches 2.5m high even on De Hessenhof's sandy soil.
- 2 *Helenium* 'Loysder Wieck'
A curious form of a popular late-summer perennial whose name means "Loysder town windmill". It thrives on moist, fertile soils. Grows to 90cm tall.
- 3 *Verbena stricta*
Related to the better-known *V. bonariensis*, this is also a late-summer flowering, sun-loving and drought-tolerant short-lived perennial. Grows to 90cm tall.
- 4 *Allium senescens* x *nuttan*
One of several alliums flowering from August to September that Hans is working on. This strain has good foliage and is reliable over many years. Grows 30-60cm tall.

▷ hybrids or cultivars." There are exceptions, hellebores and agapanthus for example, but on the whole visitors find the vast majority of the plants to be identical to those growing in the wild.

Hans has always included horticulture students in his workforce; one of them, Miranda, came as a student and "stayed for ever," he says – they were married in 1999. "We employ about five people during the growing season. We start from the beginning in everything and we do it all ourselves, just as it should be."

Key to their success must lie in Hans and Miranda's approach to compost making. "I use leaf mould to make compost, and I've done so for 25 years. It is a co-operation with the local council... we get leaves from churchyards and residential streets and compost them. For potting, we combine two- and three-year-old leaf mould, which is tobacco-like in texture, and we use only organic fertiliser, some additional pumice and bark, but it is 85 per cent leaves." This mix seems to avoid the 'nitrogen robbery' which afflicts plants grown in many commercial peat-free composts.

Hans and Miranda have been remarkably successful at running a business while remaining true to their convictions. De Hessenhof is a true plantsman's nursery and although it already attracts regular visitors from Belgium and Germany, it deserves to be better known beyond the Dutch border. □

Among the test and nursery beds at De Hessenhof is a gravel garden with plants that are drought-tolerant.

- 5 *Agapanthus* 'Avignon'
A useful shorter agapanthus for later summer colour, flowering from July to August. Height up to 50cm tall.
- 6 *Aster thomsonii*
Flowering from mid-summer to mid-autumn, this Himalayan-origin aster is a very good do-er, although it does need re-propagating by division every few years. Grows to 90cm high.
- 7 *Silene regia* 'Prairie Fire'
Spectacular flowers in early summer. Best grown among other plants to hide gawky stems. Grows to 50cm tall.
- 8 *Soldado* 'Loysder Crown'
Grown originally as a cut flower, this is a good garden cultivar popular on the nursery – non-running and tidy after flowering. Grows to 1.2m tall.



USEFUL INFORMATION

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