

Specialising in a wide range of choice perennials, many of which can be seen growing in a beautiful walled garden on site, **Ellenbank Nursery** near Kirkcudbright has much to offer its visitors, as Roy Lancaster discovered. Photography by Tim Sandall



Roy admires one of Elizabeth MacGregor's captivating *Eryngium* selections

Nurseries to visit

KIRKCUDBRIGHT IS a small historical town in Dumfries and Galloway famed for its artists and as the location where, in 1794, Robert Burns reputedly wrote the Selkirk Grace.

But it was not a poet or a painter that brought me to the town on a wet, wild and windy day in June last year. I was about to fulfil a long-held desire to visit Elizabeth MacGregor's nursery and to finally see for myself the home of one of Scotland's most-admired growers of choice perennials.

I first met Elizabeth and her husband Alasdair at the prestigious Gardening Scotland Show, held on the outskirts of Edinburgh in June each year, and had been attracted by her gold-medal exhibit which demonstrated a talent for design and an eye for a good plant.

Eye-catching borders

The nursery, established about 20 years ago, is alongside the MacGregor's home, Ellenbank, on the Dumfries road about 1 mile from the centre of Kirkcudbright. It occupies 1.6ha of a west-facing slope on a shallow, free-draining, acidic loam and is divided into three sections, one of which is a propagation and sales area

with polytunnels and cold frames. Close by is a wonderful brick-lined, stone-walled garden displaying perennials, shrubs and old roses for height. These are grown in well-maintained borders and beds, edged with terracotta tiles. The largest area, however, is a piece of open ground above the road where perennials are lined out in long beds in grass for easy access. It is these nursery

'I COULD NOT RESIST BUYING A SMALL, NEAT LITTLE PLANT NAMED VIOLA 'MRS LANCASTER' ...'

beds filled with the likes of irises, day lilies, crocosmias, eryngiums, potentillas and campanulas that catch the eye as you turn into the house and nursery entrance. When in flower they offer the promise of more good things to come.

It was in one of these beds I admired *Eryngium* 'Cobalt Star', an *E. bourgatii* hybrid with a rosette of long-stalked, deeply-lobed, blue-green leaves with spine-tipped teeth. It arose six years ago

as a seedling in the nursery and is worth growing for its 60cm tall, dark stems topped by tiny flowers that last a long season, maturing a deep cobalt blue. Another home-raised seedling, yet to be named, resembles *E. alpinum* with its characteristic long-stalked, heart-shaped basal leaves and soft prickly ruff of filigreed bracts. This seedling, however, has distinctive flowerheads of a softer blue changing to deep amethyst by mid July.

The eryngiums made an impressive contrast with blooms of neighbouring *Leucanthemum x superbum* 'Sonnenschein' whose large butter-yellow buds open to display big, creamy-yellow daisy heads with a golden heart. They are carried on 75–90cm stems and, according to Elizabeth, this plant is 'a good doer.'

Herbaceous potentillas

Both here and in the walled garden I was taken with the excellent range of herbaceous *Potentilla*, one of which, 'Arc-en-ciel', produces low clumps of green foliage and 30–40cm stems supporting superbly attractive, large, loosely double blooms, the ruffled petals of which are a dark mahogany with pale terracotta highlights. Dazzling *Potentilla*



'Flamenco', meanwhile, has flowers of an intense flame with a darker centre borne on 40cm stems held over fresh green foliage. A new selection to me was *P. nepalensis* 'Ron McBeath' with numerous bright pink single flowers on 40cm stems over a long season, named for and presumably discovered by the respected alpine grower and plant hunter who was for many years head of the Alpine Department at Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh.

I was pleased to also see several well-known potentilla cultivars being offered such as 'Monsieur Rouillard' with loosely double, mahogany-red flowers with a lighter suffusion, and 'William Rollison' that has double orange-red flowers with a yellow reverse and prostrate habit – it

is ideal for spilling over a path or low wall. The same goes for another selection new to me, *P. x hybrida* 'Jean Jabber' with bright yellow and orange flowers over silvery foliage.

Violas are one of Elizabeth's great specialities and I could not resist buying a small, neat little plant named *Viola* 'Mrs Lancaster' (no relation!) whose pure white, yellow-eyed flowers 3cm across have a most delightful scent. Elizabeth recommended that I plant it in a shady, moist soil, which I have done, and I now await results. Another viola to catch my eye was *V.* 'Butterpat', a seedling from *V.* 'Pat Kavanagh' raised here that has strongly scented, rich yellow flowers with a few dark lines and a violet spur. ▶

Violas carpet the sloping stock beds at Ellenbank Nursery (above)

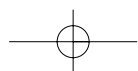
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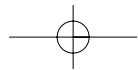


ELLENBANK NURSERY

Tongland Road, Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway DG6 4UU
Tel and fax 01557 330620
Email elizabeth.violas@btinternet.com

● Ellenbank is predominantly a mail-order nursery, open at certain times. A mail-order catalogue is available on request
Open 25 April–6 October, Monday, Friday and Saturday, 10am–5pm
Wheelchair access Yes
Assisted wheelchair access Yes
Toilets Yes





ELIZABETH ON ERYNGIUM

Several selections of *Eryngium* are sold at Ellenbank Nursery – they are among the favourite plants of owner Elizabeth MacGregor (right). 'While we list and propagate a varied range of perennials, we have for many years had a special interest in eryngiums, or sea hollies,' she



says. 'Our collection includes a number of our own hybrids, which we assess in stock beds before deciding which to name and add to our catalogue. *Eryngium* 'Cobalt Star' (above), which we introduced at Tatton Park in 2005, was the first and others will follow.

Growing sea hollies

'Eryngiums produce metallic-blue spiky flowers that vary from pale amethyst to deep vibrant violet shades. As long as cultural needs are met they make easy and reliable perennials. Sun and good drainage are essential, but I find larger hybrids perform better and make stronger plants if they also have a deep fertile soil, combined with free drainage. A bucket of grit or fine gravel dug in at planting time is beneficial for producing a good root system.

'An open, sunny site, not in the shade of trees or shrubs or surrounded by other tall perennials is ideal. Eryngiums look great in a gravel garden and once established tolerate dry conditions.'



Veronicastrum virginicum 'Pointed Finger' (above), with its horizontally held flower spikes, is well named

Displayed to perfection

Many of the plants that I saw in the stock and sale beds I found displayed to good effect in the fine walled garden, open to visitors to the nursery. None were more upstanding than *Galega* 'His Majesty', an ideal border subject, forming bushy clumps up to 1m high of divided (pinnate) green leaves and freely borne racemes of lilac-white pea flowers in summer. Best of all, 'His Majesty' is easily grown in most any soil.

Nearby, in the same border, I spotted *Geranium* 'Nora Bremner', which is one of Elizabeth's favourite selections for planting as ground cover beneath roses and shrubs. Its low mounds of soft green foliage are plastered with 6cm-wide, wisteria-blue, white-centred flowers from June to August.

An even better plant for ground cover, Elizabeth believes, is *G. 'Dilys'*: an Award of Garden Merit plant named after Dilys Davies, a former chair of the Hardy Plant Society whose garden, on a mountain above Ullswater, was once a magnet for plant lovers. Her geranium is vigorous, low growing and produces a long succession of light rosy-purple flowers from June to November, excellent value for money. Also of particular note was

G. Rozanne ('Gerwat'), a deservedly popular cultivar that Elizabeth uses to splendid effect, spilling out from urns and containers, its ebullient growth and large, vivid blue, white-eyed flowers from May to November providing the garden and nursery with one of its most envied visitor attractions.

Dynamic duo

In one border I found two rather different, spanking-good perennials in *Iris ensata* 'Pin Stripe' and *Veronicastrum virginicum* 'Pointed Finger'. The last of these requires plenty of space to accommodate its robust vase-shaped clump of 1.7m tall stems with whorls of willow-like, toothed leaves. At the time of my visit each stem was crowned with numerous long, slender racemes of tiny lilac flowers, the dominant terminal raceme longer and distinctly curved like an egret's neck. The resultant gracefully spreading and arching display was abuzz with insects, particularly bees and hoverflies: a magnificent sight.

The iris was more contained in habit, growing happily in what appeared to be a normal but regularly mulched soil, its erect 60cm stems branched above, each arm supporting a large rounded



Dactylorhiza x grandis

flattened bloom with white to pale lilac falls marked with narrow violet lines and a basal yellow flash. It is but one of a host of iris grown here, another being beautiful *I. sibirica* 'Silver Edge' with rich blue, silvery-white-margined flowers on 70cm tall stems. Both these irises need a fairly rich soil in a sunny position, somewhere that does not dry out in summer.

Dazzling orchids

Perhaps the garden's most striking flowers however, on the day of my visit, belonged to a clump of a robust terrestrial orchid, a hybrid between two of our native species *Dactylorhiza fuchsii* and *D. praetermissa*. Such hybrids have been given the name *D. x grandis*, an appropriate epithet that describes well the effect of their 60cm tall, full-bodied spikes of rich, deep purple flowers rising above darkly spotted, pale green, fleshy leaves. I was even more delighted to see plants available in the sales area.

Elizabeth has strong opinions on what makes a good plant ('I don't like miffy plants,' she says) and a cursory glance in the walled garden and stock beds amply bear this out. She is also active in breeding and selecting better perennials and has achieved successful results in a



Iris ensata 'Pin Stripe'



relatively short time, as her catalogue bears witness. This has been designed by Elizabeth and Alasdair, and contains a wealth of colour photographs of temptations to test the gardeners' resolve.

My most recent meeting with this enterprising and talented pair was at the RHS Flower Show at Tatton Park last year when their outstanding display of cottage-garden perennials won for them another gold medal and, as icing on the cake, Best Exhibit in the Floral Marquees. Perhaps Kirkcudbright should be celebrating another artist after all. ■

Roy Lancaster, VMH, is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee

For more on unusual plants, read *The Plantsman*, sister publication to *The Garden*. In the June edition, climbing *Dicentra* and *Ceanothus* will be profiled. To subscribe call 020 7821 3401 or visit RHS Online at: www.rhs.org.uk/plantsman



The RHS Flower Show at Tatton Park 23-27 July 2008 (23 July: RHS Preview Day). Visit www.rhs.org.uk/flowershows for full details or to book tickets. To order tickets by telephone, call 0870 842 2223



Strident *Potentilla* 'Flamenco' (above) and more delicate *Morinia longifolia* (above right)



Geranium Rozanne (above); Elizabeth, Alasdair and Roy examine a *Viola* (below)

