

Hoo House Nursery near Tewkesbury (below) specialises in perennials, such as *Geum coccineum* (right). Plantswoman and nursery owner Julie Ritchie (far right) chatting with Roy Lancaster.



Roy Lancaster visits...

Hoo House Nursery

Renowned for choice herbaceous plants including *Penstemon* and *Geranium*, as well as a range of alpine plants, Hoo House Nursery in Tewkesbury is filled with treasures

Author: **Roy Lancaster VMH**, broadcaster and member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

Hoo House Nursery

Address: Hoo House, Gloucester Road, Tewkesbury, Gloucestershire GL20 7DA
Tel: 01684 293389

Web: www.hoohouse.co.uk

Open: for nursery and wholesale sales 10am-5pm, Mon-Sat; 11am-5pm, Sun; please ring to check Nov-Jan

Plant catalogue: download from website or send 3 x first-class stamps

Mail order: no

❖ Hoo House Nursery also occasionally attends plant fairs (but not flower shows).



HOO HOUSE NURSERY

Like most plant explorers I always feel a tingle of pleasure when I unexpectedly encounter a plant of my own introduction in a garden or nursery. Last year, in June, it was orange-red-flowered *Geum coccineum* in the sales area at Hoo House Nursery near Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire that brought back memories of a mountain pasture in northeast Turkey in 1977 above the Black Sea city of Trabzon. It was a mere pinch of seed that provided enough plants to share with gardening friends, and I was thrilled – and a little surprised – to find it still available in the trade. But then Julie Ritchie, who together

with husband Robin started their nursery business in 1986, is a passionate plantswoman who loves a challenge and is loath to lose a valued plant.

Lifelong interest

Julie's interest in plants comes from childhood country walks with her parents, both keen gardeners, in Essex in the 1960s. She left school to take a degree in Landscape Architecture at a college in Cheltenham which is where she met her husband. 'I was trained to design with plants but not propagate them,' she says. This was to change when, now working as a garden designer and with the help of Robin (a garden maker), she >>>



Roy and Julie Ritchie (right) discuss the many merits of *Penstemon hirsutus* var. *pygmaeus*, one of Julie's great favourites.



found that she could not readily obtain some of the plants she desired from nurseries. As a direct result, she became a plant propagator, self-taught, specialising in perennials – especially hardy geraniums (see box below), penstemons and salvias – as well as an impressive range of rock-garden

Most of the plants Hoo House Nursery offers are raised from cuttings or seed (above) on site.

plants. Interestingly the nursery has been peat-free since 2001, its composts mixed and supplied by a Leicestershire source. The nursery site is around 1.6ha (4 acres) and, apart from Robin (a 'dab hand at building and making things work'), Julie employs one full-time and one part-time member of staff.

Seaside attraction

I have long been a fan of *Erigeron glaucus*, the common name of which (beach aster) provides a clue as to its native habitat along the Pacific coast of California and Oregon. I have seen it there growing on coastal cliffs; it is often planted on retaining walls and rock gardens along the English coast

– most especially in Devon and Cornwall, where it is established on cliffs in some places. It grows just as well in some inland gardens, where it forms a carpet of evergreen, blue-green foliage studded in summer with bold, single aster-like, lilac flowers, peevishly and unfairly dismissed by Reginald Farrer in *The English Rock*

Garden as 'stodgy'. I once saw it covering the surface of a dry raised bed at the base of a large cedar of Lebanon, which says something about its tenacity. On a dry sunny bank below the Ritchie's house is planted *E. glaucus* 'Sea Breeze', a selection that would have Farrer turning in his grave. Planted around 10 years ago, it has made a dense

Fine countryside (left) forms a backdrop to the nursery. Tried and tested plants sold here include *Astrantia major* 'Elaine's Pink' (above left) and *Osteospermum jucundum* 'Elliott's Form' (above right).

carpet 2.4–3m (8–10ft) across, plastered with vivid pink flowers, and was attracting small tortoiseshell butterflies. 'Not one for cold, winter-wet sites, but full sun and good drainage,' is Julie's recommendation. On the same bank I spotted grey-leaved and aromatic *Teucrium ackermannii*, a carpeting, sub-shrubby perennial with heads of >>>

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Geraniums at Hoo House Nursery

Among Julie's specialities are hardy geraniums, many of which are planted out in a display garden around the house

Geranium himalayense 'Derrick Cook' ❶ caught my eye for its spreading habit (150 x 90cm/5 x 3ft after four years) and luminous white flowers 5cm (2in) across with violet veins radiating from the base of each petal. *Geranium* 'Orion' ❷ is a favourite

of Julie's. She had put out three plants several years ago and they have merged to form a bold, spreading mound up to 75cm (30in) in the centre bearing showy, big, dish-shaped blue flowers with a white eye from June into July. A plant of robust growth, it is

excellent between taller perennials. In the same bed was *G. 'Nimbus'* ❸, a favourite of mine as much for its exquisite, finely divided filigree foliage as for its blue-violet flowers with a white eye and darker veins. I grow it with shrubs where it loosely

fills bare spaces between. It is excellent for underplanting shrubs, too, reaching 60cm (24in) or more in height. Its seedling *G. 'Blue Cloud'* ❹ has similar divided foliage and larger blue-purple flowers. A patch of three plants has achieved 1.8–2.4m (6–8ft) across and 60cm (24in) high after several years. Quite different was *Geranium* 'Elke' ❺ which appears influenced by *G. sanguineum*. Julie praised its low habit and its 'good-tempered nature' to about 30cm (12in) tall.

Its flowers have a silvery edge and a white centre, and its foliage is capable of attractive red tints in autumn. All these flower best in full sun but are tolerant of light shade, as is *G. 'Red Admiral'* ❻, a hybrid of *G. psilostemon* with *G. sylvaticum* f. *roseum* 'Baker's Pink': its reddish flowers have black veins and a black eye. It forms a mound to 60cm (24in). One of the best for shade, including dry shade, is European native *Geranium nodosum* whose small flowers vary in colour from pink

to magenta and white. Though it seeds freely, unwanted plants are easily removed. Julie pointed out white-flowered *G. nodosum* 'Silverwood', named for the Hampshire garden in which it was raised. 'The white flowers,' says Julie, 'twinkle in the dark.' She has also been raising her own, one of which, *G. nodosum* 'Julie's Velvet' ❼, has flowers of velvety purple-pink with a pale margin. Like other seedling selections, it is propagated by root cuttings to maintain its identity.



Gillenia trifoliata (below) is an easily grown perennial with wiry stems, masses of white dainty flowers and reddish-tinged foliage in autumn.



tiny, red-purple, two-lipped flowers proving popular both with butterflies and bumblebees. This is seen in few gardens, but for rock gardens or dry walls it is worth a try.

For lovers of hardy succulents *Sempervivum* 'Russian River' is a must. It, too, was on the dry bank and I cannot say I have ever seen a bolder or more dramatic cultivar of houseleek than this. The largest rosettes measured at least 15cm (6in) across, coloured red on the outer leaves becoming slightly more glaucous tinted towards the centre. The spikes of pale pink flowers can be anything up to 30cm (12in) tall when fully developed.

Before leaving the dry bank I stopped to admire prostrate *Osteospermum jucundum* 'Elliott's Form' which, planted around 20 years ago, has spread to cover an extensive area. Julie says it begins flowering in May, continuing unabated until September or October. She loves this perennial for the intense carmine pink of the daisy-like flowers on opening, fading as they mature to pale pink with a blue central spot.

'Hoo House Nursery also grows a good, select number of the taller, herbaceous penstemons'



The mature plant of *Erigeron glaucus* 'Sea Breeze' (above) that Roy was delighted to see growing in the Ritchies' garden.

The plant was originally bought many years ago from the late Joe Elliott's Broadwell Nursery in the Cotswolds and Julie recommends it for a sheltered, sunny, well-drained site on a slope or dry retaining wall.

Perfect penstemons

A look through Hoo House's sales area revealed a good number of plants new to me. One of the few dwarf penstemons reliably persistent on the rock garden, according to Julie, is *Penstemon hirsutus* var. *pygmaeus*. She adores it for the neat hummocks of leafy rosettes and its conspicuous heads of stalked, funnel-shaped lilac flowers with a white mouth. As a bonus, its green leaves turn purple in winter. The *Alpine Garden Society Encyclopaedia of Alpines* describes it as 'easy and rewarding', so why is it not more commonly grown?

Hoo House Nursery also grows a good, select number of the taller, herbaceous penstemons. Julie's favourites among these include: *Penstemon* 'Blackbird', up to 1.2m (4ft) tall with dark stems and deep



Highlights at Hoo House Nursery include (above, top to bottom): *Penstemon hirsutus* var. *pygmaeus*; *Oenothera fruticosa* subsp. *glauca* 'Erica Robin'; and *Penstemon* 'George Elrick'.

wine-purple flowers, bred by Ron Sidwell, a college lecturer of Julie's; *P.* 'George Elrick', rich pink flowers with a white throat on a short bushy plant; and *P.* 'Pensham Victoria Plum', the flowers of which are beautiful soft lilac with crimson markings in the throat.

With their sons following careers elsewhere, there is no-one to whom to pass the business, but Julie and Robin are comfortable with the site and their life with no wish to expand. 'Indeed,' says Julie, 'even if I stopped selling plants I would continue propagating. It's in the blood now.' ●