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RARE FIND

Derry Watkins' Special Plants nursery and garden are a treasure trove of exciting cultivars and ideas



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A rust-finished sculpture in Derry Watkins' garden
ABOVE Watkins with her husband Peter Clegg, who designed the layout of the garden

In an idyllic valley just outside Bath lies Special Plants, the nursery owned and run by self-confessed plantaholic Derry Watkins. It's a place that lives up to its name, thanks to her dedication to only growing interesting plants that she adores. "I grow a small amount of a very large number of different things, because that's what interests me," she explains.

Growing up in Connecticut, however, Watkins loathed gardening. "My mother was a passionate gardener, but I only became interested when I got my own tiny bit of garden aged 22. I've never stopped wanting to grow things since." She moved to England, married and became a mum, fitting in freelance work as a writer and editor, all the while collecting and growing plants. Watkins made a habit of propagating everything, and began selling her extra plants locally. Turning her passion into a business would have been a natural step, but she resisted, fearing it

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might spoil the fun. However, after visiting a nursery in the States selling really interesting plants, and clearly making money, she gave in. "I was 40 years old, and I thought if they can do it, so can I. I came home and threw myself into the nursery 100%."

Watkins started off growing mostly tender perennials, but today these make up only a quarter of her stock, the rest being hardy. These include lots of alpines and herbaceous perennials, some shrubs and just a few trees and climbers. "What's important is that a plant is beautiful in one way or another, whether it's the flowers, foliage, shape, architecture or scent."

She also sells a wide range of seeds,

including annuals, biennials and monocarpic, much of which is harvested from her garden, and some of which should be sown green. "Many people don't get good germination rates because their seed is too old," she explains. "Almost all the umbels, *Ranunculaceae* and anemones need to be sown fresh. In fact, most hardy perennials will germinate better if sown from fresh seed and left outside to get on with it."

From plant sales, catalogues and swaps, Watkins' quest to track down new things is insatiable. "There's no limit to the number of plants in the world and I'm constantly learning how to grow something I've never grown before, or how to grow it better." She



ABOVE The garden includes gravel planting as well as a pond and shaded areas **BELOW** It slopes down to and mimics the lay of the surrounding land





There is an array of exciting plants on offer at the nursery

DERRY WATKINS' FAVOURITE PLANTS

1 *Woodwardia unigemmata* is a spreading evergreen fern with magnificent arching fronds that emerge bright reddish, fade to rusty brown, then mature to green. Tip rooting. H 1m

2 *Thunbergia gregorii* is a vigorous, twining, tender, evergreen climber with brilliant orange flowers. H 3m

3 *Salvia patens* Giant form is a dramatic perennial with elegant spikes of extra-large, deep-blue flowers. Hardy, apart from in exceptionally cold winters. H 1.2m

4 *Erythrina crista-galli* is a rare, half-hardy tree that dies back to a short trunk. Racemes of sexy scarlet flowers. Both trunk and leathery leaves bear vicious thorns. H 1.5-2.5m

5 *Impatiens omeiana* is a herbaceous perennial grown for its lush, variegated, palmate foliage and yellow flowers in late autumn. H 45cm

6 *Pucedanum officinale* is a rare British native perennial that produces wonderful mounds of fine foliage, occasionally topped by large, golden-yellow, lacy umbels. H 1m

7 *Romneya coulteri*, the Californian tree poppy, is a herbaceous perennial with masses of huge, white, poppy-like flowers with a golden-yellow centre and long stems of greyish-green foliage. H 2.5m

8 *Beesia calthifolia* forms a mound of heart-shaped, shiny, evergreen, marbled leaves flushed with purple, and small, white flowers on wiry stems. Happy in deep shade. Grows to 30cm

9 *Ricinus communis* 'New Zealand Black' is a tender annual with leaves, stem and fruit in deepest purple with a metallic sheen. Poisonous. H 2m

"THIS MIX OF UNUSUAL PLANTS AND STRONG FORM MEANS THE GARDEN AND NURSERY ARE KEY DESTINATIONS FOR RENOWNED DESIGNERS"

has widely travelled in her search, to places including South Africa, India, Nepal, Chile, Turkey and Bulgaria, although admits it's getting harder to bring new things back.

On home turf

Watkins' own house and garden sit directly behind the nursery, and enjoy wide-open views of the surrounding vale. She and her husband Peter Clegg moved to the property, then a derelict barn with 3.5 acres of land, in 1996, and while she concentrated on her fledgling business, Peter, an architect, focused on converting the barn into a home.

The obvious place for a garden was the derelict field beside the house, but it was "on a steep slope, chest-high in docks, nettles and thistles as far as the eye could see. I couldn't begin to think about what to do," she admits.

So, she asked Peter to help. "He designed the shapes, physically made all the beds then just handed it over to me to do the planting. It was wonderful." The whole garden is about reflecting the nearby hills and fields. Wide grass paths snake around large beds filled

with beautiful combinations and bold shapes of yew, box or beech. Although the slope is hard work, it benefits the design, as it's not possible to see everything all at once. Each year, Peter continues to develop different areas and enjoys making what he refers to as "shapes in the landscape".

This mix of unusual plants and strong form means the garden and nursery are key destinations for renowned designers, with Dan Pearson MSGD, Arne Maynard and Sarah Price all regularly paying homage. Her garden tours are popular, and the nursery is busy, to Watkins' constant delight. "Every single time I sell a plant it's a thrill, because it's a very sincere compliment," she says. "You grew the right thing, at the right time, in the right way, and they want it."

Special Plants, Greenways Lane, Cold Ashton, Chippenham, Wiltshire SN14 8LA. Nursery open March-October, 10am-5pm daily. Check website for garden openings. www.specialplants.net