



THE MEAD NURSERY Nursery profile

Roy Lancaster is captivated by a delightful nursery in Wiltshire, filled with choice perennials, rock plants and bulbs. Photography by Tim Sandall

FLOWERY MEAD In raised beds at The Mead Nursery (above) a range of low-growing, sun-loving plants thrive, including *Helianthemum* and various *Geranium*

THERE IS DEFINITELY something reassuring about a nursery that has swallows nesting under the roof of its potting and packing shed, not one but two pairs. Far from distracting part-time propagator Margaret (Marg) Fry, their company during the breeding season helps convince her that whatever might be going wrong in the rest of the world, in this little patch of Wiltshire all is well. Situated in a green and rural site within 15 minutes of no fewer than five towns, the nursery is owned and run by husband and wife Stephen and Emma Lewis-Dale who started up here 16 years ago. It was a greenfield site, and willow-lined old meadows still surround the nursery on three sides, one of them supporting scattered populations of our native red-flowered grass pea or vetchling, *Lathyrus nissolia*.

Stephen began his training at the Welsh

College of Horticulture in Flintshire, and Emma at Pershore College. They met while working for a wholesale nursery in Wiltshire; on marrying they decided to look for a suitable site on which to establish a nursery to grow their own kinds of plants. These are principally perennials including rock plants and bulbs which they sell at plant fairs and similar venues, as well as from the nursery. They propagate most of their plants and are forever looking for new species and cultivars to add to their impressive selection. Most are described in their catalogue and on their website with their own photographs.

Plants on display

A small but colourful display garden abuts their cottage, while the rest of the site supports polytunnels and cold frames for stock or propagation. Nearby

are raised beds for plants needing full sun and good drainage: the local soil is wet and neutral. All these areas are kept in impeccable order, making plant selection an easy, enjoyable operation. One of the nursery's specialities is *Helianthemum* (rock rose) – 18 are listed on its website – and among the many tried-and-tested cultivars on offer are several home-raised seedlings (see box, right). Rock roses are reliable shrublets for full sun, and Stephen advises trimming them back (soft growth only) after flowering to help keep plants compact.

Growing on a raised bed with the rock roses was *Geranium harveyi* which I marked 'must have' in my notebook. A woody-based, low-growing and wide-spreading perennial, the small, neat, deeply divided, grey hairy leaves have paler midribs, which imparts a silvery sheen to the upper surface. Contrasting with these are the mallow-pink or purple flowers approximately 1.5–2cm (½–¾in) across in summer. A South African native, this princely cranesbill does best in a sheltered but warm and sunny, well-drained position.

Another silvery-foliaged gem, and feathery fine with it, is *Erodium* 'Julie Ritchie' which produces a low mound topped by clear white flowers with two pale purple central stains. It is a plant worth growing despite occasional reversions (which can easily be removed). I also liked popular *E.* 'Fran's Delight', the silvery foliage of which displayed pale, purplish pink flowers with a darker pencilling, borne on slender stems up to 10cm (4in). Both these give me a second summer display in the sunny, sandy soil of my front garden. ▶



SUMMER SELECTION Roy Lancaster with Stephen and Emma Lewis-Dale on their nursery (left), set among flower-filled meadows. *Geranium harveyi* (above left) from South Africa caught Roy's expert eye

ROCK ROSES AT THE MEAD

Helianthemum cultivars raised at The Mead Nursery



Helianthemum 'Ellen' was spotted 11 years ago by a visitor to the nursery as a sport on *H.* 'Rose of Leeswood' and named for the man's wife. The double flowers are small but profuse.



Helianthemum 'Kathleen Mary' was named for Stephen's mother and forms a compact mound that is plastered in summer with delightful soft pink, darker-eyed blooms.



Of the same parentage as *H.* 'Kathleen Mary' (*H.* 'Ben Ledi' x *H.* 'Baby Buttercup') is *H.* 'Diana', named after Emma's mother. It has darker, raspberry-red flowers.



'IN ONE OF THE RAISED BEDS I ADMIRER A BOLD CLUMP OF A STRIKINGLY ATTRACTIVE GLADIOLUS WITH RASPBERRY-RED FLOWERS'

Enjoying similar conditions, though even better in a trough or dry wall, were *Antirrhinum molle* and *A. hispanicum*, two little grey-downy snapdragons from southwest Europe where they are found in rocky habitats. Both are of a dense, bushy nature producing in summer white or pink flowers that I found utterly charming. Easily rooted from cuttings, in some conditions (such as gravel beds) they are apt to seed about freely.

Will power

One of my treasured old-fashioned garden plants is sweet william, *Dianthus barbatus*, whose fragrance is enough to set me dreaming of childhood encounters with these multicoloured garden favourites, often used to edge rose beds and borders. The Mead Nursery offers a sweet william from the Nigrescens Group that has maroon foliage and dark maroon buds opening to maroon-red

flowers. I deemed it totally irresistible and took a plant home with me.

In one of the raised beds I admired a bold clump of a strikingly attractive gladiolus with raspberry-red flowers, each of the lower segments displaying a creamy-yellow panel with a dark central bar. There was some discussion as to the identity of this plant, which resembled in some characteristics wonderful *Gladiolus cardinalis*. My friend and nurseryman Gary Dunlop (who has a most comprehensive collection of these and many other plants in a hillside garden above Belfast) is of the opinion that The Mead Nursery stock is an un-named clone of *Gladiolus x colvillii*, a hybrid (*G. cardinalis* x *G. tristis*) first raised as long ago as 1823. The plant normally grows and flowers well for Emma and Stephen, however they do recommend that the corms be planted deeply (15cm/6in) to protect against



frost. Indeed, low temperatures depleted their stocks last winter; they hope to have plants on sale again in 2011.

A showy sage

By contrast, *Salvia blancoana* is less fussy though it, too, prefers a sunny, well-drained site. Low-growing and carpeting in habit, with relatively narrow grey-green leaves, this shrubby evergreen sage from Spain produces pale blue-violet flowers in whorls of up to six on slender arching shoots 30cm (12in) or more long in May or June. I first came



ON SHOW In the gardens (above left) Emma and Stephen grow many of the plants that they sell. *Antirrhinum hispanicum* subsp. *hispanicum* 'Roseum' (left) grows best in a sunny, well-drained position



across it at the Cambridge University Botanic Garden where it thrived and flowered well, and I now have it on the Bagshot sand in my front garden where it survived the recent winter and started to flower by the end of May.

In the same bed I have also planted *Osteospermum jucundum* 'Blackthorn Seedling', an Award of Garden Merit plant raised by Robin White. It looked sensational at The Mead Nursery and I could not resist trying a plant here at home where it has come through the winter untouched and was flowering by late April. Its rich, deep-pink daisy flowers appear all summer long provided plants are kept deadheaded.

In one of Stephen's raised beds constructed from railway sleepers I saw an immense plant of *Ferula communis* with finely divided frizzy foliage and a 2.5m (8ft) stem supporting numerous domed umbels of tiny yellow flowers. This

bold Mediterranean plant is claimed by some to be short lived but a specimen in my garden, on London clay, has flowered on and off for several years and I wouldn't be without it. Another tall plant, reaching its peak in the display garden when I visited, was *Chamerion angustifolium* 'Stahl Rose' (better known as *Epilobium*), a selection of rosebay willowherb. Although invasive by nature, it is easily controlled and the distinctive spires of rosy summer flowers that it produces are a fine sight.

Emma and Stephen Lewis-Dale are a friendly pair and run a 'tight ship' propagating and growing a wide selection of quality plants. It must also be said Emma is equally adept at making cakes, as I discovered before leaving at the end of a long and exciting day. ■

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

BLUSH FLUSH

A charming clone of *Gladiolus x colvillii* caught Roy's eye (above left). *Chamerion angustifolium* 'Stahl Rose' (above) is a willowherb that produces tall wands of summer flowers



THE MEAD NURSERY

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Tel 01373 859990
Open 1 Feb-10 Oct 2009, Wednesday-Saturday and Bank Holiday Mondays 9am-5pm, Sunday 12-5pm
Website www.themeadnursery.co.uk
Catalogue Cost 5 x first-class stamps; no mail order
● Open for The National Gardens Scheme Sun 16 Aug, 12-5pm; £3

