

## ROY'S TOP THREE PLANTS

Among the pick of Kevoch Garden Plants' alpines are:



*Daphne wolongensis* 'Kevoch Star', a recently-introduced shrub (far left); *Galeopsis speciosa*, a relatively rare British native hemp nettle (above left); Roy with nursery owners David and Stella Rankin (left)



*Silene zawadskii*: Develops a tight, flattened rosette of slightly leathery leaves from which slender stems ascend up to 30cm (12in), bearing white flowers 2.5cm (1in) across, each seated in a bladder-like calyx.



*Primula glomerata* (CC 3843): Plants of this collection number have inclined heads of violet-scented purple flowers, farinose (covered in white powder) in bud. A species from western China, Tibet and India.



KEVOCH GARDEN PLANTS



### A RARE RHUBARB

A handsome, as-yet un-named *Rheum* from the Himalaya grown from seed and sold by Kevoch Garden Plants (right)



## KEVOCH GARDEN PLANTS

# Nursery profile

Roy Lancaster delights in a mail-order nursery south of Edinburgh specialising in alpines and woodland perennials. Photography by Tim Sandall

**IN ITS RELATIVELY SHORT LIFE**, the Gardening Scotland Show, held each year at the beginning of June in Edinburgh, conveniently close to the airport, has attracted a great deal of attention and acclaim. For many nurseries from north of the border, this is their 'big one' and rightly so. I have visited several of these in the course of this series and now it is the turn of another: Kevoch Garden Plants from Lasswade in Midlothian, 5 miles south of Edinburgh city centre. This nursery has won five gold medals and best in show for the last three years – no mean feat

given the strength of the competition. It is owned and run by husband and wife David and Stella Rankin, who have enjoyed walking and hiking since family outings with their children in the Swiss Alps and Pyrenees, and still enjoy mountain and wilderness holidays to this day. 'Seeing plants in the wild and studying their habitats has helped enormously in establishing them successfully in cultivation,' Stella says, and any gardener who has travelled in the world's wild places would agree. On a bright morning in August last year I headed south from Edinburgh

intent on visiting their nursery to see their results for myself. Stopping on the road to open the nursery gate I was surprised and delighted to see growing on the roadside embankment large-flowered hemp nettle (*Galeopsis speciosa*), a native annual herb of the deadnettle family *Lamiaceae*. Up to 60cm (24in) tall, it has bristly stems and leaves, and whorls of relatively large yellow and white flowers each with a conspicuous purple blotch on the lip. I had not seen this uncommon wild flower, which is mainly found in the north of Britain, since my boyhood days in Lancashire,

and the Rankins, when I told them, were equally excited. Once inside the gate I found an extensive working area of some 1.6ha (4 acres), consisting of cold frames, polytunnels, shade tunnels, stock beds for propagation, and standing areas for perennials to supply design orders and special collections. Stella works closely with designers and landscapers, offering 'tailor-made' collections of alpines, waterside and woodland plants. On receipt of details of site, soil and aspect from the client, the nursery assembles and supplies a list of suitable plants, a

service increasingly in demand. The Rankins employ a small, dedicated team of staff including a full-time propagator, trained at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. During my tour I admired the splendid potting shed sporting a newly-acquired potting machine, plus special facilities for seed sorting and storage. Stella encouraged me to run my hands through some newly-prepared compost, a basic free-draining alpine mixture of loam, composted bark, coarse grit and a little peat plus a slow-release fertiliser. But what of the plants? ►

The finely-divided petals of *Silene hookeri* (right), a beautiful but challenging alpine from western North America. *Lewisia cotyledon* 'Bright Eyes' (below right) makes a colourful choice for a wall or rock garden

#### Alpines and forest dwellers

Given the Rankins' predilection for high places and woodlands, I was not surprised to see their nursery well stocked with such plants as gentians, primulas, trilliums, iris, meconopsis, saxifrages, daphnes, ericaceous plants and a thousand and one other treasures, many of wild, seed-collected origin, supplied complete with their names and collection numbers.

One plant of particular interest to me was *Daphne wolongensis*, a species named and described by plantsmen Chris Brickell and Brian Matthew two years ago, from a plant raised by the Rankins from a single seed originating in China near Wolong in northwest Sichuan in the 1990s. The species has since been introduced by others but the Rankins' plant, given the cultivar name 'Kevoek Star', is the one they now offer. An evergreen shrub of erect, dense, compact habit, their original plant (which I later saw in their private garden, growing in partial shade on an acidic soil of pH5.5), has developed into a bush of nearly 2 x 2m (6½ x 6½ft) with narrow, blunt-tipped leaves. It is at its best in April into May, when fragrant white to pale blush pink, star-shaped flowers are produced from the leaf axils all along the grey shoots. Propagated from cuttings, this is an exciting new introduction to our gardens.

#### New and Old Worlds

Among the many alpine grown I was particularly attracted to two small champions, *Silene hookeri* and *S. zawadskii*. The former is a challenge to any gardener: it is a plant that hates summer wet so will do best in an alpine house. I was intrigued by its low habit and relatively large flowers, 4–5cm (1½–2in) across, varying from pale to rich pink, each petal split into four segments. It is native to dry rocks and scree in the mountains of Oregon and California, whereas *S. zawadskii* (see box, p195) hails from the eastern Carpathian mountains of Romania and is rather more amenable in cultivation.

A startling contrast is *Lewisia cotyledon* 'Bright Eyes', an excellent strain of evergreen-rosseted rock or dry-wall



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plants offering sprays of relatively large flowers in a range of bright colours. Nearby, in a cold frame, David showed me an attractive *Incarvillea* species that he and Stella had collected as seed at 2,000m (6,500ft) in Sichuan where it flourished in hot, dry limestone rocks and crevices by a river. It forms a tuft of finely dissected foliage not unlike an *Anthriscus* but smaller and daintier. These seedlings were flowering for the first time and David was thrilled to see the slender racemes of long-tubed, pink blooms. It will probably need winter protection to keep it dry.

#### Ornamental rhubarbs

In another cold frame we examined two wild rhubarbs, one of which, Chinese *Rheum alexandrae*, was represented by a large batch of broad, fleshy leaf rosettes. I have seen this species in the mountains of western Sichuan close to the Tibetan

border where it can be common by streamsides and in damp places, and only last year I admired a fine planting of it in flower in the rock garden at the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh where its erect columns of pale yellow-green bracts stood out a mile. It is less satisfactory however, in southern Britain, especially in warmer, drier areas. Next to it was a batch of an un-named *Rheum* species collected by Chris Chadwell as seed in Nepal in 2004. These were well established, as-yet unflowered seedlings with bold rosettes of simple, ovate, rich green leaves showing strikingly red petioles and veins beneath.

A good number of the plants on offer have been received over the years as seed or propagules from gardening friends and fellow plantsmen. I cannot end however, without mention of the poppies and primulas that are available here in impressive variety, though none



*Primula euprepes* (left), one of the few truly black-flowered plants. It needs a moist but free-draining soil and does best in partial shade



were in flower at the time of my visit.

Recently introduced *Primula euprepes* is one of the few truly black flowers, held on contrasting white stems above leathery leaves. Among the many others that attracted my attention I should mention *P. glomerata* (see box, p195); *P. serratifolia*, a candelabra species with yellow, orange-centred flowers, suitable for damp and shade; *P. luteola*, a robust species from the Caucasus Mountains with umbels of yellow flowers on tall stems; red-flowered *P. maximowiczii*, and *P. petlotii* from North Vietnam, grown from seed collected by Keith Rushforth. The last is a curious species with strawberry-like runners and substantial heads of bright, deep pink flowers. I was also taken with a yellow variant of normally orange-flowered *P. cockburniana*, received from Inverewe, which David told me comes 100 percent true from seed.

Of the *Meconopsis* species, trays of healthy seedlings filled a large part of a polytunnel and I was pleased to see yellow-flowered *Meconopsis integrifolia* and red-flowered *M. punicea*. Although relatively short lived, these legendary mountain poppies from western China and southeast Tibet are sure to tempt keen gardeners relishing a challenge and with the necessary cool, moist growing conditions to offer.

I was amazed to see potted and healthy individuals of several *Pedicularis* including diminutive yellow-flowered, long-tubed *P. longiflora* var. *tubiformis* being grown on capillary matting. Now there's a challenge – which left me wondering whether there was any plant the Rankins could not grow were they to put their mind to it? ■

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

#### IN GOOD ORDER

Serried ranks of tempting alpine lined out at Stella and David Rankin's nursery (above)



## KEVOCK GARDEN PLANTS

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**Visits:** garden open by appointment only or through Scotland's Gardens Scheme.  
● Plants are available by mail order (please send 4 x first-class stamps for catalogue), at shows such as Gardening Scotland, lectures and Edinburgh Farmer's Market (on Saturdays from late February to end of May). For more details on this and the Rankin's garden consultancy service, visit their website (above).

