

## SOME HARDY BUSY LIZZIES

Sorcha sells several kinds of perennial *Impatiens*



*Impatiens puberula* from northern India and Nepal is a rather scrambling perennial, reaching around 80cm (32in) high. It makes a good partner for hostas in a shaded spot, flowering all summer.



*Impatiens arguta* from northern India along the Himalaya to southwest China is hardy in much of the UK, flowering summer to autumn. Good for a shaded border, it grows about 60cm (2ft) high and wide.



*Impatiens stenantha* flowers over a long period. The stems are red flushed and flowers are speckled with red. Hardy to -10°C (14°F) or colder; 60cm (2ft) high, 90cm (3ft) wide. Give plenty of water in summer.



Sumptuous summer-flowering *Iris ensata* 'Rose Queen' (above) is a plant for a moist spot in some sun

Roy Lancaster and Sorcha Hitchcox (left), owner of Constantine Garden Nursery. Located between Falmouth and Helston, in Cornwall, it features an impressive range of plants

Selected at the nursery, *Dahlia* 'Cornish Ruby' (left) grows to about 90cm high by 60cm wide (3 x 2ft).

Succulent *Aeonium balsamiferum* (right) gives off a honeyed aroma



reception building where visitors can discuss or buy plants, place orders and buy local crafts.

### Learning on the job

Sorcha, who has an unquenchable passion for plants, bought the nursery in 2004 having completed a foundation course in horticulture at Duchy College in Rosewarne near Camborne. She was determined to learn more about the world of plants – and what better way than to grow them from scratch and sell them?

'It was a baptism of fire,' she says with a laugh, 'but it was an incredible learning process and it hasn't stopped.'

As with many small nurseries, new stock has to be bought from specialist growers each year to meet demand but around half the plants at present on offer, mostly perennials, are produced on the nursery from seed, cuttings or division. Sorcha is also sourcing new and less-common plants to expand her range. Her nursery is tucked away down a narrow, winding lane so recommendations by word of mouth

from satisfied customers are important; she has already built up a healthy mail-order service, with customers as far away as northern Scotland.

As we talked, a group of three customers approached clutching a basket of perennials. This included bold Japanese *Dracocephalum argunense* 'Fuji Blue' (up to 15cm/6in with narrow foliage and bright blue, tubular curved flowers with a flared mouth) and *Salvia blepharophylla*, a Mexican species of creeping habit with spikes up to 30cm (12in) carrying a continuous supply of signal-red ►



# CONSTANTINE GARDEN NURSERY Nursery profile

A recently renamed nursery in Cornwall proves well worth a diversion from the beaten track, says **Roy Lancaster**, for its interesting range of unusual plants. Photography by Tim Sandall

**THE FIRST TIME** I saw *Ozothamnus hookeri* was in January 1988 on a visit to Tasmania. It was growing on the summit of Mt Wellington, 1,270m (4,170ft) above the island's capital Hobart, with another species, *O. ledifolius* whose small, crowded, sticky, golden-backed leaves I knew from cultivation in Britain. Both species are endemic to Tasmania and occurred here scattered across the rain-sodden, wind-blasted, boulder-strewn summit plateau, forming dense, knee-high hummocks. The foliage of *O. hookeri* consisted of grey-green, scale-like leaves on slender grey, hairy shoots, the upper portions of which were crowded with small clusters of creamy-white flowerheads. In July last

year I saw this distinctive shrub again, enjoying the same wind-blasted conditions and, yes, it was raining. This time, however, it was in a garden on a Cornish hillside approximately two miles from Falmouth.

The garden, which owner Sorcha Hitchcox describes as 'work in progress', also boasted plantings of perennials including another Tasmanian native *Juncus pallidus*, a bold, clumping rush with pale-green shoots, in the wild reaching 2–3m (6½–10ft) but half that here. Interesting as the garden was, it was the compact and well ordered Constantine Garden Nursery that I had come to see with its polytunnels, cold frames, potting shed and a new



## 'BEING ADVENTUROUS, SORCHA CANNOT RESIST TRIALLING SOME REPUTEDLY DELICATE ITEMS'

Extraordinary *Sprekelia formosissima* (above) is a tender bulb; it will grow in a pot outdoors for summer, but should be brought indoors before the frosts

flowers from June into autumn. *Salvia blepharophylla* enjoys a little shade where summers are hot, and a free-draining but rich soil where it will form patches of attractive, rich, glossy green foliage. The third plant was *Geranium 'Spinners'*, a well-known and reliable cranesbill, a seedling of *G. pratense* selected in the New Forest nursery of that name by Peter Chappell in the 1980s. I have it in my garden where its divided foliage up to 1m (3ft) is topped by supplies of bowl-shaped flowers of a rich purple-blue from late spring to midsummer.

### Trialling the tender

Although the nursery is in a sheltered hollow, it is something of a frost pocket and in recent winters temperatures of -10°C (14°F) have been recorded. While this deters her from growing the more tender plants, being of an adventurous nature Sorcha cannot resist trialling some reputedly delicate items. Others spend winter under cover, kept just above freezing. One such is *Aeonium balsamiferum*, a succulent subshrub from the Canary Islands with fleshy green leaf rosettes on branching stems



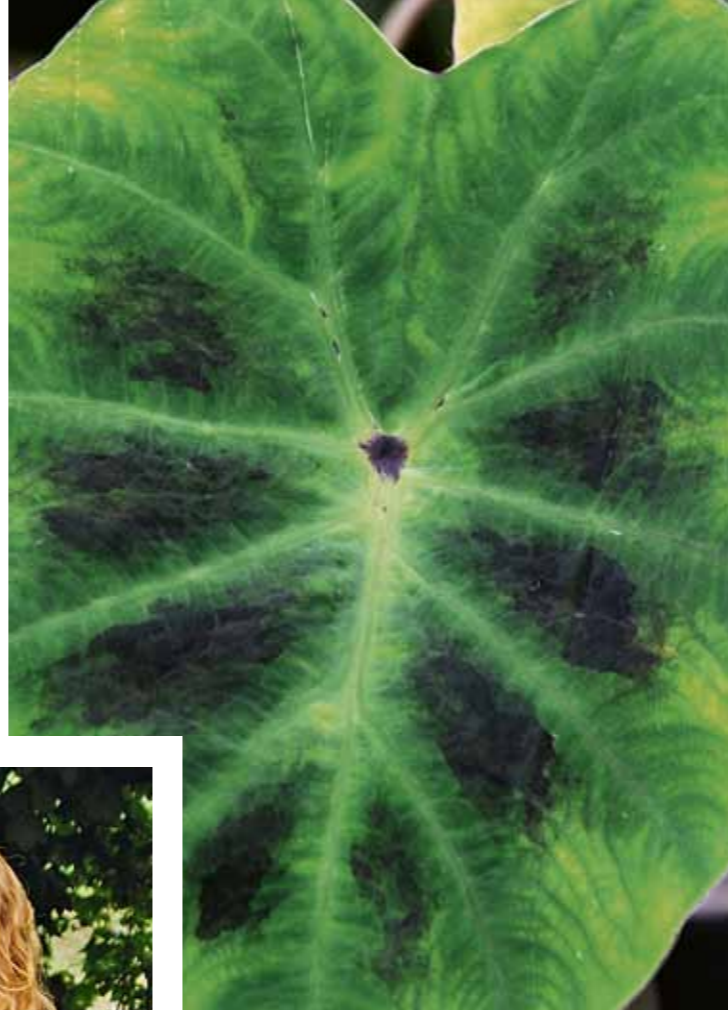
that, on a hot day, give off a balsamic odour – to Sorcha's nose, more a scent of honey. This is proving popular with some visitors, as is newly acquired aroid *Colocasia gaoligongensis* from the Gaoligong Mountains of southwest China. For the last two years Sorcha has grown a couple of plants of this in a sheltered ditch where they survived -10°C (14°F) to produce bold, dark-stalked, broad leaves of a bloomy pale green with a dark shading between the veins giving a marbled effect. These have reached 1m (3ft) in height.

Another plant flourishing in this damp corner was *Iris ensata* 'Rose Queen'

with flowers of a beautiful soft shell-pink and a darker magenta centre. This can reach 90cm (35in) and is clearly a favourite of Sorcha's, as are two ligularias she showed me in a nearby cool, damp border; one of them was beautifully cut-leaved *Ligularia przewalskii*. I recall once seeing this forming colonies along a stream in northern Sichuan, China, its tall slender spires of yellow flowers borne on dusky stems. At the nursery it is planted with robust *L. x yoshizoeana* 'Palmatiloba', a German-raised hybrid (the offspring of *L. dentata* crossed with *L. japonica*) which forms huge clumps of bold, deeply cut leaves and clusters of

Grown for its tropical-looking foliage, *Colocasia gaoligongensis* (right) has proved hardy to -10°C (14°F) planted outdoors at the nursery in a ditch.

Roy and Sorcha admire choice shade-loving perennial *Anemonopsis macrophylla* (bottom) with its delicate foliage and nodding, waxy blooms (below)



orange daisy flowers more like those of the *L. dentata* parent. At 1.8m (6ft) it is a spectacular waterside perennial.

### Growing venture

Sorcha showed me an enclosed area below a sycamore where shade-loving plants are displayed for sale on the tops of large wooden electric cable drums that she refers to as her 'cable tables'. Here were *Hosta*, *Bergenia*, *Arisaema*, *Sauromatum* and charming *Anemonopsis macrophylla* with waxy, nodding, lavender flowers above ferny leaves.

Among climbers on sale I noticed *Aconitum hemsleyanum* 'Red Wine', a striking burgundy-red-flowered selection of a normally violet-flowered plant which Sorcha, in her catalogue, recommends should be allowed to 'have its way through a foster shrub and give surprises in late summer and early autumn'.

As I left the nursery I saw a sign placed for all to see: 'Please note we do not use chemical weedkillers or sprays. We try our best to keep it weed-free manually. Also our slug and snail controls are dog, cat and bird friendly.'



'Customers find these words reassuring,' Sorcha says, 'and we do our best to keep on top of everything while providing well-grown, healthy plants and a helpful service to visitors.'

Sorcha and her small team of staff and helpers have achieved much in this corner of Cornwall and with her search for new plants and plans for further demonstration gardens, I expect to see Constantine Garden Nursery heading for an exciting future. ■

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

See Constantine Garden Nursery's market stall every Wednesday from Mar–Sept at Lemon Quay, Truro. Being a small nursery, stocks of some plants mentioned may be limited; please telephone ahead to check availability

Delightful Mexican *Salvia blepharophylla* (above) has a long flowering season, from June into autumn



## CONSTANTINE GARDEN NURSERY

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