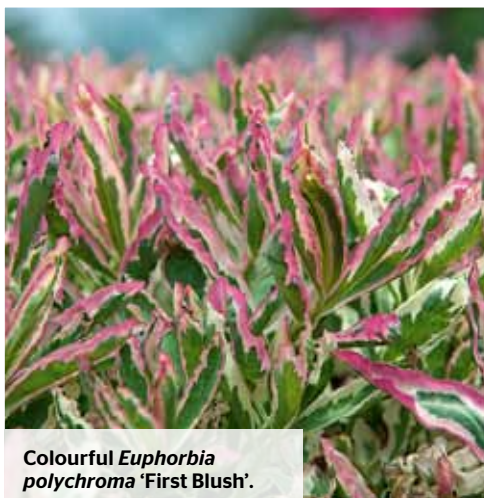


Roy Lancaster visits...

Breezy Knees Nursery and Gardens



Colourful *Euphorbia polychroma* 'First Blush'.

Developed from scratch on farmland in the Vale of York, Breezy Knees Nursery and Gardens offers a wide range of perennials and has become an impressive attraction for gardeners and plant enthusiasts

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



Lavender-mauve flowered *Salvia napifolia* proves hardy at Breezy Knees.



Roy Lancaster meets Colin and Marylen Parker at Breezy Knees nursery.

It is a familiar story: successful professionals giving up their jobs to turn their hobby into a new career. But in husband-and-wife Colin and Marylen Parker's case, it wasn't just a change of job. They were selling off a pharmacy business in order to start a garden and accompanying nursery from scratch on farmland in the Vale of York. It was a broad, flat landscape they chose, open to cold southwesterlies in winter – hence the jaunty name chosen for the venture.

But the die was cast. In 1999 they began putting plans into practice, developing the site. The nursery opened five years later in 2004 and today offers a wide selection of perennials.

Challenging conditions

While problems created by winds are relatively easy to address, cold winter conditions are not. In winter 2010–11 the nursery experienced temperatures down to -18.5°C (-1°F) over several weeks, which caused severe damage. 'We lost a third of our stock,' Colin says, 'including most alstroemerias and many other perennials. Our normal range of around 2,000 different plants was reduced to 1,300.' It was a depressing and sobering experience and had it not been for their gardens, the situation might have been irretrievable.



Nepeta x faassenii
'Kit Cat'.



Nepeta racemosa
'Snowflake'.



Rudbeckia fuldiga var. *deamii*
and *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune'
combine in the garden at
Breezy Knees; both are
also sold in the nursery.



Plants in the nursery are
conveniently displayed
at waist height.

Breezy Knees gardens lie on a mostly well-drained, sandy site of around 6ha (14 acres) some five minutes walk from the nursery. Colin and Marylen had been quick to note that inexperienced gardeners visiting their nursery were more inclined to buy those plants in flower in preference to those that were not. A show garden was needed to demonstrate a plant's height and character, especially its 'flower power',

and in 2005 they set about making one. No ordinary show garden is this – more a series of themed gardens and features that is constantly being added to. Here, up to 6,000 different plants, mostly perennials, can be seen, well grown and well labelled.

The gardens include a rock garden, cottage-style garden, shrub, rose and shade gardens plus herbaceous beds. There is even a Rogue's Gallery – two parallel borders planted with potentially invasive perennials to be cautious of. As well as their decorative attractions, Breezy Knees gardens provide a source of propagation material to replenish stocks in the nursery.

Living up to its name

In bright but breezy conditions, I spent a pleasurable day in June last year exploring both nursery and gardens, discovering many old plant friends and an encouraging number new to me. These included *Lychnis flos-jovis*

'Peggy', a low, compact selection of this cottage-garden favourite, forming mounds of grey woolly leaves and stems with dense heads of rich pink campion flowers over several weeks. I also admired *Achillea sibirica* subsp. *camschatica* 'Love Parade', a taller-growing relative of our native *Achillea ptarmica* (sneezewort) with erect stems, narrow, toothed leaves and flattish heads of small, lilac, daisy-like flowers. Given the explosion of colour cultivars that native *Achillea millefolium* (yarrow) produces, I was not surprised to see this one, which should be as tough and easily grown as its better-known cousin.

Colin extolled the virtues of lilac-flowered *Asperula taurina* subsp. *caucasica* (woodruff) as perennial ground cover under shrubs, even in dry shade. He had it growing beneath a large *Olearia macrodonta* which he told me he had won in a tombola when attending a lecture I gave at Askham Bryan College in York many years ago. It seems I had drawn the winning ticket (but I begged him not to remind me exactly how long ago it was).

Catmints and more

I was struck by the number of labiates (*Lamiaceae*) grown in both the gardens and nursery, including a good selection of *Nepeta* (catmint) species and cultivars. White-flowered *N. racemosa* 'Snowflake' particularly attracted me as a front-of-the-border subject, more compact and low-growing than *N. racemosa alba*. *N. subsessilis* 'Blue Dreams' (a better colour than disappointing 'Pink Dreams') and *N. x faassenii* 'Kit Cat'

Sedums at Breezy Knees

Sedums are a group of perennials particularly favoured at Breezy Knees – not surprising given their ease of cultivation and reliability in flower, even in dry and exposed situations.

❶ *Sedum hybridum* 'Czar's Gold' forms low carpets of growth in summer covered with myriad yellow starry flowers that attract a host of bumblebees and other insects.

❷ *Sedum telephium* Atropurpureum Group 'Postman's Pride' is an arresting, upright selection to 40cm (16in) with foliage of darkest blackcurrant and heads of red flowers in summer.

❸ *Sedum spurium* 'Voodoo' is another carpeter with distinctive dark purple-red tinted young foliage, turning green with age. Reddish-pink flowers appear in summer.

❹ *Sedum aizoon* 'Euphorbioides' forms succulent clumps 30–35cm (12–14in) tall, red-stained in their upper halves with terminal clusters of rich golden yellow flowers for several weeks.



were also new to me, each charming in its own way but outgunned in terms of impact by taller and classier *N. grandiflora* 'Bramdean' with its erect, much branched habit up to 60cm (24in) with slightly glaucous foliage and crowded clusters of rich, lavender-blue flowers on dark, almost black, shoots. This superb perennial thrives on the chalk at Bramdean House in Hampshire and equally well, if not better, on other especially well-drained soils.

In the same family is *Salvia napifolia*, a Turkish species described by the American authority Betsy Clebsch as 'a perennial with understated form and quiet beauty'. Hardy in the gardens at Breezy Knees, it has formed a compact mound of large softly-hairy, broad-based leaves above which are carried 30cm (12in) spires of small, >>

York nursery

pale lavender to purplish-violet flowers for several months. Less commonly seen in gardens and demanding a well-drained site in sun is *Sideritis syriaca* which makes low, spreading clumps of crowded, grey-woolly shoots and narrow leaves. The small, yellow, two-lipped flowers are borne in whorls in the axils of clasping pointed bracts in summer. A plant for the connoisseur, I recall finding it on dry, stony slopes in southern Greece where its dried leaves are sometimes used to make a refreshing tea.

The best garden euphorbias

I have long been a fan of euphorbias in the garden, in particular those robust perennial species with pale leaf midribs from the Himalaya and southwest China, such as *Euphorbia sikkimensis* and *E. schillingii*. In one of his borders Colin had an eye-catching clump some 65–75cm (25–30in) tall (wrongly) labelled *E. wallichii*. The true species I have admired in the mountains above Srinagar in Kashmir, but it is rarely seen in cultivation in the West, its name being usurped by several related

Euphorbia cornigera.



Papaver orientale cultivars in the gardens at Breezy Knees.



Nursery information

Address Breezy Knees Nursery and Gardens, Common Lane, Warthill, York YO19 5XS.

Tel 01904 488800.

Website www.breezyknees.co.uk

Mail order not available.

Nursery open 1 April–30 Sept, Mon–Sat 10am–5pm, Sun 11am–5pm.

Gardens open Daily 21 May–30 Sept 11am–5pm, admission £5 (under 16s free). No dogs except guide dogs.

Toilets: Yes.

Wheelchair Access: Yes.

Refreshments: Café open 21 May–30 Sept Thurs–Sun.



Roy found much of interest in the nursery.

plants, some well worth growing, others not. The Breezy Knees plant thriving here is undoubtedly *E. cornigera*, a handsome sturdy species from the western Himalaya, with conspicuous yellow flowerheads worthy of its RHS Award of Garden Merit. In my opinion this is one of the best euphorbias for general cultivation, and I am encouraged to hear there is to be an RHS Trial of garden euphorbias in the future that will help sort out the naming of these fine perennials.

One of the most commonly planted of all euphorbias is *E. polychroma*: its low mounds of bright yellow flowers are such a reliable and cheering sight in early spring. New to me here, however, was the cultivar 'First Blush' whose terminal growths are cream variegated

with a rose flush, a character according to Colin and Marylen which 'sticks with it through the season'.

Back in the nursery the sales benches were busy with visitors. Anthea, a regular customer, had brought along her friend Patricia for a birthday treat. Most of Breezy Knees' customers live fairly locally, but increasingly the nursery and gardens are attracting visitors from further afield. These include coach parties from Hardy Plant Society groups – 'They are really keen,' says Colin – as well as people from as far afield as the Netherlands, usually on holiday. 'We rely on word of mouth rather than big spending on advertising,' he tells me and, judging by the laden trolleys I saw Anthea and Patricia trundling to their car, that appears to have been a good decision. ●

www.rhs.org.uk To watch a video of Roy Lancaster at Breezy Knees, talking about some of the plants that most appealed to him, visit 'Latest issue' at www.rhs.org.uk/thegarden

