

# Roy Lancaster visits... Special Plants

The nursery of a renowned plantswoman proved to be an exciting and memorable destination for Roy Lancaster, thanks to its profusion of rare and exciting plants

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



The glamorous flowers of *Impatiens bicaudata* (left), a tender species that may be enjoyed outdoors in summer and overwintered under glass, kept frost free.



In the wild, ruby-red flowered cliff dweller *Gladiolus flanaganii* (left) grows in virtually inaccessible places. Happily the plant is also available at Special Plants.



Roy Lancaster with Derry Watkins (above) in the garden of her home, which is alongside the nursery (left) where she grows a wide range of desirable hardy and tender garden plants.

## Contact

**Address** Special Plants, Hill Farm Barn, Greenways Lane, Cold Ashton, nr Chippenham SN14 8LA. Tel 01225 891686.

**Website:** [www.specialplants.net](http://www.specialplants.net).  
**Open** 1 Mar–31 Oct, daily, 10am–5pm; other times please ring to check.  
**Plant catalogue:** online; mail order Sep–Mar only.  
**Seed list:** available online or send 2 x first-class stamps.  
**Garden:** open 11am–5pm, Tuesdays mid-Apr–mid-Oct; Tues & Weds Jul–Sept.



I have wanted to grow the so-called suicide lily (*Gladiolus flanaganii*) ever since I first saw its blood-red flowers on a nursery exhibit at an RHS Flower Show at Tatton Park several years ago. Sadly, it wasn't for sale. Subsequently, on a visit to its mountain homeland in South Africa's Drakensberg I asked our guide if we might get to see and photograph it. In reply, he pointed to the vertiginous basalt cliffs high above and said, 'if you are prepared to risk your life climbing to that place you might just get lucky'. With the plant's English name in mind, I thought better of it.

Then in September last year, at Derry Watkins' nursery Special Plants in South Gloucestershire, I was thrilled to see a batch of plants in flower and for sale – one of which, need I say, is now in my garden. It came with a flower that produced a seed capsule which has provided me with a batch of seedlings to grow under glass as a reserve should my plant not survive winter.

## Plant palpitations

I first met Derry, an American by birth, in the 1990s when she was organising Rare Plant Fairs. She also staged a much talked-about exhibit of perennials and annuals at the

1999 RHS Chelsea Flower Show which is where she launched her seeds-in-a-packet sales that today, via shows and mail order, is an important aspect of her business.

Those who have met her will be familiar with her explosive enthusiasm for plants, especially when talking about her experiences in growing them. She was on top form when I visited her at her nursery, some seven miles north of Bath on a steep slope above the Swainswick valley, midway between Cold Ashton and Freezing Hill.

Derry and her architect husband Peter bought the property, a derelict barn, in 1996. While Peter was building their new home she was establishing a nursery behind it. Today, this relatively small space is filled with plants – perennials mainly – that can cause keen gardeners to experience palpitations.

After the shock of finding *Gladiolus flanaganii*, my senses reeled on seeing *Campanula versicolor*, a large, lax-stemmed, smooth perennial with fleshy blue-green leaves and long, loose panicles of fragrant, star-shaped flowers 4cm (1½in) across of a pale blue with a darker eye. It is not the hardiest of bellflowers and probably best grown in a container and kept frost free in winter. In summer, display it on a >>



*‘I make no apology for concentrating on plants that need special treatment – if only frost protection’*



With rather graceful, nodding blooms, *Dahlia* ‘Mermaid of Zennor’ (left) makes a contrast to large, brightly flowered dahlia selections. Roy and Derry (below) immerse themselves in gardening.



*Trachelium caeruleum* ‘Black Knight’ (left) continues to flower well into autumn. This perennial is tender, so may be most easily grown annually from seed.

low wall or pedestal to give room for its flowering stems, which may be spreading or pendulous. In the wild it grows in crevices on limestone cliffs in the Balkans and southern Italy.

Another must-have plant requiring glasshouse protection in winter is *Impatiens bicaudata* from Montagne d’Ambre (Amber Mountain) in northern Madagascar, a superb specimen of which Derry displayed in a large pot in the cool shady lee of the house. Here it formed a mound of thick, red, succulent stems 60cm (2ft) high and wide, clothed with bold green leaves with a red midrib. The large red, exotic-looking pouched blooms with a yellow throat and short-forked spur appear singly in the upper leaf axils.

**A prickly character**

In complete contrast is *Solanum quitoense*, a spectacular foliage shrub from the Andes where I have seen it in the vicinity of Ecuador’s capital city, Quito. A small sign placed in a batch of young plants issued a challenge to potential buyers: ‘frighten your neighbours’. This refers to the small, sharp spines along the purple veins on both surfaces of the large, flannelly leaves. It is yet another tender subject for



The soft blue flowers of *Campanula versicolor* (above) are produced on trailing stems. It makes a good plant for a large pot, but may need some frost protection through winter.



a frost-free glasshouse, though for adventurous gardeners it does make a

of the loveliest of pastel effects in the colour spectrum. It enjoys full sun or half shade and is a perfect gap-filler.

**Annual appeal**

Among the many annuals offered as seed I was struck by *Trachymene coerulea* (syn. *Didiscus caeruleus*) with its deeply lobed leaves and its slender 60–90cm (2–3ft) stems carrying small scabious-like heads of blue flowers. It contrasts strikingly with *Scabiosa atropurpurea* ‘Derry’s Black’, a hybrid strain from a cross between *S. atropurpurea* ‘Chile Black’ and *S. atropurpurea* ‘Ace of Spades’, raised in Derry’s garden and only named three years ago. This can reach 1m (39in) with dark plum-purple little flowerheads. It is said to germinate better and is easier to grow than other similar selections.

The most delicate little annual grass I have ever seen is now known as *Panicum* ‘Fibre Optics’, the name given by Derry, describing the

appearance of the delicate inflorescences. Equally attractive in rain or sun, this effect continues over several months from summer into autumn.

All these and many other annuals that Derry sells require a well-drained, sunny site to perform well. Of the many other special plants offered, some of them illustrated in her excellent Plant List, I particularly noted a white-flowered selection of *Geranium maderense* which, although not in flower on the day, must be a sensation when it is.

Except in warm sheltered gardens in the south and west, this magnificent monocarpic plant (it dies after flowering) is best grown to flowering stage in a large container in a frost-free environment before displaying outdoors in the garden.

*Trachelium caeruleum* ‘Black Knight’ is another plant that normally requires mild, frost-free conditions if you are to enjoy its deep violet flowerheads and dusky leaves. We used to grow the typical form of this Mediterranean perennial in pots for indoor decoration when I worked as an apprentice on Bolton Parks in Lancashire, and occasionally it was treated as an annual for use in summer bedding schemes. I have also seen this plant established and naturalised in old stone or red-brick garden walls in milder climates such as in the walled kitchen garden at Mount Congreve near Waterford

in the Republic of Ireland. The last plant I noted on the day was the curiously nodding, single lilac-flowered *Dahlia* ‘Mermaid of Zennor’, a plant I once grew for several years until I neglected to bring it under glass one cold winter and that was the end of the affair.

Or was it? Special Plants is perfectly named; I make no apology for concentrating on plants that need special treatment – if only frost protection. The rewards of growing such plants more than justify that extra effort.

I find it delightfully ironic that Derry (whose mother and grandmother were ‘crazy about gardening and plants’) should grow up in 1950s Connecticut, USA ‘hating gardening’ and swearing ‘never to become a gardener’ only to end up becoming one of the most passionate of all. ●

**Roy’s choice of *Salvia* and *Stachys***

Derry Watkins offers various *Salvia* and closely related *Stachys* at Special Plants. These are fairly hardy outdoors but may need winter protection in cold periods.

- ❶ *Salvia* ‘Silas Dyson’ was named after his son by salvia guru William Dyson, Head Gardener at Great Comp near Sevenoaks in Kent. Sub-shrubby to 1m (39in) it bears a succession of crimson flowers while its foliage has an aroma of spearmint. Pruning it almost to the base each March encourages fresh growth.
- ❷ *Salvia greggii* ‘Stormy Pink’ is similar in habit but with pale pink flowers, darker in bud and with a grey calyx. A long-flowering bestseller for Derry, it appeared in her garden as a seedling 11 years ago and is still thriving outdoors despite recent cold winters.
- ❸ *Stachys* ‘Hidalgo’ has downy grey foliage (said to smell like the soft drink 7Up) topped by upright but spreading leafy stems, bearing whorls of salvia-like, coral flowers from summer until the first hard frosts.

