

Hans Kramer

He's the unassuming owner of one of Europe's most admired specialist nurseries and we're delighted to introduce him as our latest columnist

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

Ask most specialist nurserymen about their favourite nurseries and you'll probably find De Hessenhof in the Netherlands high on their list. Great Dixter's head gardener Fergus Garrett describes it as "one of the best nurseries in Europe".

I first visited more than 20 years ago and still treasure my copy of a heavily annotated catalogue. The man who runs De Hessenhof is Hans Kramer, a tall, quiet-spoken Dutchman who has developed a reputation for a sharp eye, an unrivalled knowledge of perennial plants, and for the quality and variety of the plants he produces.

It is hard to imagine that 35 years ago, the nursery, now packed with stock beds, bordered with displays of mother plants and shaded by mature holm oaks, was little more than a sheep meadow. In 1981, when he was just 20, Hans persuaded his grandfather, a farmer, to let him grow plants on the land. "I had finished horticultural college," he says. "It was a time of economic crisis and there were no jobs. I knew that eventually I would want to run my own nursery and just decided that the only way to earn a living would be to try straight away. I took the plunge." In other parts of the country, nurserymen Piet Oudolf and Coen Jansen were also at the start of their careers, and across Europe there was a burgeoning interest in perennial plants. "It was an exciting time and I feel very lucky to have been starting out then," says Hans.

A significant moment came in 1982 when Hans persuaded his parents to lend him the family car to visit Britain to look for plants. "From the ferry I drove directly to Great Dixter and was entranced by the plants I saw," he says. "Christopher Lloyd appeared, shouting at me and telling me off because the gardens didn't open until the afternoon." Lloyd mellowed when the enthusiastic Hans explained his desire to run a perennials nursery, and the two became friends.

On the same trip Hans met nurserywoman Elizabeth Strangman. "I admired her enormously. She knew so much about perennial plants and was an example of how to run a nursery. She was a huge inspiration to me. A role model and a mentor." The two remain friends. "Every moment of that first journey to England is etched into my memory. I still have many plants that I bought with me on that trip and they are like old and dear friends. I am very attached to those plants, I feel emotional about them."

Since then Hans has developed a keen eye for neglected species and new cultivars, and amassed an encyclopaedic collection of perennial plants. Currently, his stock beds are filled with 6,000

different types of plant and the nursery's catalogue (now a weighty tome) lists some 3,000 different plants. "Miranda [Hans's wife] says I should try and edit out a few plants, but I find that very difficult," admits Hans. "Each of them has something to offer, each of them I have selected because they are special. When I think that a plant has something good about it I become an evangelist for it."

Miranda first came to work at the nursery 25 years ago, as a student attending the same college at which Hans had studied and sharing his love of plants. He is emphatic that the success of the nursery is as much due to Miranda as it is to himself. "We are a partnership, a joint enterprise," he says. "We have grown into this nursery together and the nursery has grown with us." Hans admits he doesn't like glib descriptions of him as being 'passionate about plants', but it is evident in the way he speaks that this mild-mannered Dutchman has an ardent enthusiasm for his work.

From the very beginning Hans has made his own compost (from tonnes of leaf mould collected by the local authority) and has used few chemicals, having decided eight years ago to make the nursery completely organic. While he was establishing his nursery, the renowned German nurseryman Ernst Pagels was encouraging. "He was very generous," says Hans. "And I admired that he ran his nursery organically, despite the scoffers. Now other growers laugh at me when they see that I pinch plants out to make them bushy rather than spray on a chemical. I took this step for myself, for my family and for our staff. Growing plants organically is the right thing to do."

The nursery now attracts visitors from all over the world. "Of course, I feel proud when a group of gardeners travels from Moscow to visit me," he says. "But I'm also very happy that local gardeners come here to buy plants because they're good plants well grown. What makes me most happy, though, is growing plants. Sowing seeds, growing plants is the joy of my life and that is what I will always do." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

From this month Hans Kramer takes over our Plantsman's Favourites column, and you can read his first selection of plants for February on page 22. You can find out more about De Hessenhof at hessenhof.nl

NEXT MONTH

Mick Evans, head gardener at the National Trust's Packwood House.

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