

## *Keeping Faith with a Legend*

WOOTTENS OF WENHASTON

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It is in the nature of being a plant enthusiast: you recognise that inevitable change is the order of things – you see it daily in your own garden, and feel it in your own enthusiasms. So when a charismatic plant specialist, such as Michael Loftus of Woottens of Wenhaston, dies at a relatively young age, it is a given that dramatic changes to the nursery's *modus operandi* will ensue.

But, following a period of calm handling of the company's fortunes by his widow Lizzy, with a staff of twelve at her side, a tour-de-force horticultural duo of Luci Skinner and Gillian Morris has emerged to take the nursery along a new route, yet retaining the verve, wit and horticultural vigour, that were hallmarks of Michael Loftus' creation.

Loftus claimed his love of plants and gardening from his mother Prue (her maiden name Wootten is the nursery's name). He set up the nursery in 1991 on and around his own garden in Wenhaston and by 2012, the year of his death, he had extended the enterprise to around a dozen acres.

Wenhaston itself is no stranger to horticulture, as neighbouring land once belonged to the Tradescants, that old Suffolk family whose most famous sons, John the Elder (1570–1638) and John the Younger (1608–62), were responsible for introducing so many wonderful and enduring plants from Europe, Russian and American into our gardens.

Woottens seemed to develop from a standing start in the spring of 1991 and some six months later the first customers discovered a nursery which transformed those in the know into plant-seeking missiles, locked on to particular plant targets, including auriculas, pelargoniums, day-lilies and irises, whose attributes Michael sang to the skies.

For a few years after his death in 2012 the company, still a magnet

for gardeners, continued to trade on the same site next to the family home, complete with the familiar Tim Hunkin clock commissioned for his previous venture at Neal's Yard, Covent Garden, London. The clock, adorned by a statue resembling old Father Time (modelled on a former neighbour and part-time gardener), wielding a hose, which on the hour splashed anyone walking below it, is probably the only feature that didn't make the move to the new premises in 2016. It resides with the family.

Towards the end of 2015 when Lizzy decided that she no longer wished to run the business she offered it for sale to two staff members whose plant enthusiasms and business ethos were almost mirror images of Michael's, hardly surprising since Luci and Gillian had worked with Michael for many years. In addition, though, they had in abundance the energy and determination necessary to take the nursery forward.

'We were honoured that Lizzy thought we would keep it going in the spirit of its origins. We do sometimes feel as if we have Michael looking over our shoulders, but we know that although he might not have enjoyed some of the changes we have made, he would know that our intention is to continue with his high standards, but to make our own mark.'

The hand-over was structured so that it took place when the nursery was relatively quiet and the weather reasonable. With all available hands, plus those of some extra volunteers, the nursery moved a few hundred yards down the road to the site of the breathtaking Iris Field that Michael had established: a site that is particularly close to Gillian's heart, since she had been involved with preparing the ground and establishing it when Michael first began to collect historic and other bearded irises. This was also where much of the behind-the-scenes propagating had always been carried out, so the lie of the land was familiar. In the week set aside for the move, lock, stock and every plant possible made the journey to the Iris Field site.

'We just took a week off from mail order, brought in our partners and friends – with spanners, step ladders, drills – we did it. We had no idea how things came apart, but we just went for it.'

The collection of fifty pelargonium species was first on the agenda. The benches were taken apart, posts dug out and then re-concreted into the polytunnel on the new site. Fortunately the collection could bask outdoors during summer while their new housing was being installed. These South African plants were among Michael's first loves introduced to him by his mother who collected the 'unique' and scented leaf varieties.

'Like Michael, we have strong opinions about our collection which is intensely personal. We just can't abide the violent colours of most modern pelargoniums, so we continue to specialise in the species and scented leaf pels,' say Luci and Gillian. Hardy geraniums, brunneras and other perennials were next to move, but it was the Auricula House, usually home to some eight hundred pots annually, that made most impact, especially on oncoming traffic. Its glass panes removed, the complete structure was walked up the road, carefully balanced, carried by nine staffers and other volunteers.

On the twelfth and final day of the move the double span pelargonium sales tunnel was dismantled, with help from friends in the Southwold Ladies Rugby Team. This particular fixture involved them in dealing with twenty-four benches, six hot benches, miles of fleece and wiring and a pair of wooden front doors, plus twenty hoops, all fifteen feet at their highest points.

The former site was cleared and has now reverted to residential land. The new site is zoned as a non-retail site and was also deemed an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). 'The field location couldn't be more fitting for the nursery and our own personal love of nature and wildlife. We are so incredibly fortunate to be located in rural Suffolk where the sunsets are breath-taking and the views inspiring. Early mornings are punctuated by a resident barn owl that circles the Iris Fields and a flock of pheasants hide out here from the local shoot. We have added our own chickens and are due some battery hen rescues this month: they help hugely with pest and weed control. We're also very lucky to have regular nesting birds including wrens, tits and finches.'

'Mike knew before he died and we know that the future of our

business is in mail order, not retail. And just at the time we took over business rates went through the roof, so even if we could have applied for a change of zoning, we wouldn't have been able to afford the cost.' In order, therefore, to stay in business and stay true to the high standards that Michael had set, Gillian and Luci embraced mail order with huge energy and professionalism. The propagating and husbandry skills that Michael encouraged are paramount and, although they had to reduce staff numbers drastically, they have not compromised on quality. Luci and Gillian are kindred spirits in terms of plant knowledge and the enthusiasm and affection they have for the groups of plants that have plainly seduced them!

Luci is a devoted collector of pelargonium, while Gillian favours the irises, and they are just as opinionated about their 'plant protégées' as Michael was. 'We are adding to our collections all the time . . . especially the irises. If they are elegant and old we love them, we are not so keen on the big and the blousy!

Although no longer a nursery with daily public access, Woottens still welcomes visits from customers by appointment to collect plants, take part in open days and courses, and then there are the many designers who visit with their plant lists to order stock.

There are other ways to cultivate regular, day-to-day customer access but they require planning and marketing and it is here that the new regime at Woottens excels. Forward, customer-facing facilities such as their descriptive, information- and photograph-rich website is one example of the way they keep their customers in mind. Customers are also welcomed on a regular weekend every month and on specific open days.

Sandra Sutton began working at Woottens as a propagator with Michael in 2001. In 2004 he asked her to 'look after two trays of auriculas'. Now she tends, grows and propagates more than five hundred varieties of this evocative group, including alpines, edges, selfs and fancies. She has bred many new varieties available under the Wootten's name, including 'Woottens Pearl's Gem' (named for Michael's cat), 'Woottens Arsenic Ribbons' (one of Mike's best names, say Luci and Gillian) and 'Woottens Inky Pastures'.

Gillian has taken up the iris 'baton' from Michael and some years

ago planted part of the field in chronological order, so it is possible to see the changes in breeding in a flowering-time sequence. As well as collecting modern introductions – particularly the fabulous creations of Schreiners nursery in Oregon and Cayeux nursery in France, Woottens also has a large number of historic varieties dating from 1600 to 1960. Michael began a collection of the irises that local artist and plantsman Sir Cedric Morris had bred at his Hadleigh home, Benton End, and ‘we were fortunate to be gifted the collection of William Caparne irises by a Hampshire collector, Peter Schofield.’ These are all Intermediates.

Woottens’ Bearded Irises are despatched as bareroot divisions dug from the field from the beginning of August until the end of October. Woottens also grows a wide range of *Iris sibirica*, some of which are pot-grown and can be sent throughout the year. In total there are twenty different species of iris including *Iris spuria*, *I. ensata*, *I. reticulata* and *I. chrysographes*.

Speciality open days conclude from early to mid-July with the Hemerocallis Fields, where some six hundred different ‘hems’ are in bloom and orders for lifting are fulfilled throughout the year. Woottens’ hemerocallis collection began twenty years ago and they now centre on the new American Spider varieties and unusual forms, the subtlety of which attract Luci and Gillian. They consider these combine better in a border, with other perennials, than some of the blowsy large-flowered forms.

Today Woottens continues to grow a huge range of perennials, annuals, shrubs and climbers, grasses and ferns, as they did when Michael was alive – salvia and agapanthus collections building all the while.

In addition to this on-site activity which brings the customers to the nursery and, say Luci and Gillian, is a welcome contact, Woottens attends many plant fairs and garden markets in the region, including Plant Heritage/Helmingham Hall Plant Fairs in May and September, and the Suffolk Show in late May. Luci and the various plant specialists also give lectures to horticultural societies and run up to thirty courses per year, usually on site. Woottens also offers a design service and Neill Ludmon runs the courses and

organises the design service. ‘Neill was once a customer, he taught at Capel Manor for thirteen years and became one of our friends.

‘So although we don’t have daily customer access to the nursery, we have developed these methods of getting our name and wares ‘out there’ so that people know we are still a plant destination of note’.

In Michael’s heyday at Woottens his annual publication, *The Plantsman’s Handbook*, was eagerly anticipated by customers, not only to find out what was in stock but for the personal and characterful introductions to each plant section. The first was published in 1995. In the introduction to the 1997 handbook, written in winter, Michael wrote: ‘It is that time of year. Cats have to be prised from the radiator and pushed out of doors, nurserymen dragged to their desks and word processors: the new catalogue must be written. I have suggested to the cat a role reversal: I will go and piss in the field, if it writes the catalogue. Did the word disdain did not exist, it would have to be newly minted to describe the look on her face. Talking of pissing in the field, Woottens, as of March 1, will be plumbed in; we are erecting a pristine customer toilet, suitable for use by disabled persons.’

In the 2005 publication, his joyful description of *Salvia uliginosa* is typical of his style: ‘Of all blue-flowered plants, *S. uliginosa* comes the closest to azure. So often nurserymen describe mauve and purple flowered plants as having flowers of true blue, knowing the word is in itself a magic talisman, which will quadruple the sales of a particular plant. A case in point is *S. × sylvestris* ‘Blauhugel’, loudly puffed as a breakthrough in the *Salvia superba* type, having, as its German name would suggest, true blue flowers. Rubbish! Its flowers are no more blue than my varicose veins! *S. uliginosa* is a plant to restore your faith in the meaning of the word blue. It is of an utterly joyful colour, with not the slightest sully to its rejoicing.’

In 2013 Lizzy Loftus arranged for the 2005 handbook, thought to be one of the best when first published, to be reprinted as *The Red Book*, for sale on the website. And if you can lay your hands on it and its companions (they and smaller handbooks were published

during the period 1995 to 2011) you will have a treasure trove of words and illustrations of the plants that he loved, and which Luci and Gillian and the team at the new incarnation of Woottens continue to nurture, collect and exchange opinions about.

The nursery is open to the public for browsing and buying on the first weekend of every month between March and November (10 a.m.– 4.p.m.) and pre-ordered plants can also be collected at times on Wednesdays and Saturdays.

In addition there are specialist plant open days held throughout the year. The first of these in 2018 is the Auricula Open Day on 28 April (10 a.m.–4 p.m.). Advice, demonstrations on growing and propagating from Wootten's auricula expert Sandra Sutton, as well as hundreds of auriculas in flower to buy and admire, will be on offer.

Next up is the Grand Spring Fair on 6 May when other plant specialists from across the region, potters and craftspeople spend the day at the nursery.

From mid-May to mid-June the Iris Fields are the main attraction, when the 2.5 acres holding some six hundred varieties becomes a living rainbow.

On 7 July the Pelargonium Collection takes centre stage and Julie Nicholas, a former Cambridge University librarian turned horticulturist, is the company expert offering advice and demonstrations, with more than two hundred different varieties available to admire and purchase. Luci in particular is fascinated by the forms of various species including *Pelargonium lanceolatum*, *P. caffrum*, *P. cotyledonis*, *P. tetragonum* and *P. triste* (the first to reach Europe from the South Africa in the seventeenth century).

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