

Cottage Industry

Naturalistic planting has softened the framework of this former working farmyard in Worcestershire where Kim and Rob Hurst run The Cottage Herbery

WORDS **BARBARA SEGALL** PHOTOGRAPHS **ANNAÏCK GUITTENY**



An old silo has been painted black and repurposed to house the workings for the Hursts' swimming pond.

NURSERIES

“Looking forward, working with the land and knowing our plants,” has long been the mantra of Kim and Rob Hurst. Some 45 years ago they started growing vegetables and herbs on a patch of ground at Rob’s grandfather’s farm in the Teme Valley, where the borders of Shropshire and North Worcestershire appear to merge seamlessly.

By the time they had married in 1980, their herb nursery was well established and had been named The Cottage Herbery. The couple moved to The Mill House in Boraston in 1985 and for the next 26 years continued cultivating herbs and opening their garden there for the National Garden Scheme. The nursery, however, continued to develop on the farm, expanding over the years, and in 2009 the Hursts brought home and nursery together by moving into a converted hop kiln just across the farmyard.

All the while their reputation for naturally grown herbs had been increasing. In the early days when they first took their herbs ‘out on the road’ it was to local and agricultural shows where they often joshed and jostled with the local farmers. “They might have called us the hippies on the hill – we did have long hair and we wore Black Sabbath T-shirts – but we were too young to be hippies and, more importantly, we knew herbs had to move from the fringe into the mainstream,” says Kim. “We loaded up our old Mini Pickup with a borrowed tent, my parents’ wallpapering table, our plants and a lot of handmade herbal gifts. And we got a good reception: we were invited back and also asked to other local events.”

By the late 1980s they had established an annual itinerary of garden shows, farmers’ markets and food festivals, transporting plants in a 7.5-tonne lorry and transit van. They were invited to Chelsea for the first time in 1992. “We were the tiniest nursery at the show and so excited to be asked!” Kim recalls. Their professionalism was soon rewarded with two Chelsea gold medals in 2000 and 2006.

Because herbs are used for natural flavouring and healing, the emphasis on growing them organically and avoiding the use of peat as a growing medium was important to the Hursts right from the start. In the early days they used a home-made compost that included well-rotted spent hops, coir and loam. Now they use a growing medium developed by Rob in 1989, which has coir as its base component. Known as Fertile Fibre, it carries the Soil Association symbol and Rob is still a consultant for the company.

When the couple moved to their hop-kiln home in 2009 they were ready to make another garden. Yet between that desire and reality was a time lapse of four years. The reason? Formidable obstacles, including a hop-picking machine that Rob took apart himself, plus 50 years’ worth of rubble and remnants including an old Volvo, concrete pads, tin sheds, an agricultural building and five corn silos.



Clockwise from above Crocosmia’s vibrant scarlet flowers stand out; *Lobelia tupa*; *Leucanthemum x superbum* ‘Phyllis Smith’; verbena and erigeron self-seed into the gravel; climbing roses colonise an old farm canopy.



Top Kim and Rob Hurst of The Cottage Herbery, which celebrates its 45th anniversary this year.
Above left *Echinacea* ‘Cream Magenta Bleed’.
Above right *Monarda* ‘Violet Queen’.

Eventually, with help from their daughter India and her partner Christopher, the Hursts’ months and years of dismantling, removal, restoration and drainage came to fruition and Kim was able to mark out the beds. They retained elements of the former agricultural buildings, including one of the silos, now painted black, which houses the swimming pond works, and the structure that was the canopy for the hop-picking machine. The canopy, with its structural metal uprights and curved roof struts, has taken on new life as the support and frame for a magical garden that rises and falls with the seasons. Climbers, including *Rosa* ‘Kiftgate’ and



NURSERIES

The structure that once housed a hop-picking machine was no obstacle for roses 'Kiftsgate' and 'Rambling Rector'.



R. 'Rambling Rector', use these bare bones to twist their way upwards.

The site is south-facing, open and light, and now well-drained – but it's also windy and exposed. Each plant that makes the cut (and the cast list is long) is chosen for its ability to survive and thrive in the conditions. That said, each plant's growth habit and the way it works with neighbouring plants in a naturalistic way is also much in Kim's mind as she artfully weaves them together to create a picture. She uses a combination of wild forms with cultivated plants to reinforce the naturalistic look. Many of the plants are what she calls 'herb relatives', such as nepeta, digitalis, allium and eupatorium. Perennials and annuals make up the mix and include sanguisorba, persicaria, monarda, anthemis, verbena, veronicastrum, umbellifers such as *Ammi majus*, orlaya and selinum, as well as numerous ornamental grasses.

The colours change throughout the year as spring blooms give way to bold summer plantings, and the show goes on right through autumn when foliage, seedheads and stems steal the show. An added bonus was that once the agricultural landscape



Top Grassy paths weave through large beds of naturalistic planting.
Above left *Rudbeckia* 'Cherokee Sunset'.
Above middle *Leucanthemum* 'Wirral Supreme', a cultivated form of a 'wild' daisy.
Above right Delicate *Catananche caerulea*.

was replaced by exuberant plant combinations, pollinators arrived to do their bit to keep pests down, adding movement and sound to the scene.

The herb nursery may contain what Kim calls 'bread and butter' herbs, such as common thyme, rosemary and sage, with lemon verbena, rosemary 'Green Ginger' and Moroccan mint selling particularly well in season, but her interest is piqued by plants that challenge her growing skills. Currently she is intrigued by two mints: *Mentha x piperita* f. *citrata* 'Bergamot' and *Mentha spicata* 'Algerian Tea Mint'. She likes 'Bergamot' because

NURSERIES



although it has quite spindly dark stems, it is elegant, and she's mindful of what India might like. India runs her florist business, Vervain, from the Old Cart Barn adjacent to the garden and describes it as "a brilliant florist's mint". 'Algerian Tea Mint' she says is larger and has longifolia-type leaves that are a darker shade of green with a much sweeter flavour.

Cracking difficult-to-propagate plants gives Kim and Rob great satisfaction. Rob is the propagator of the two, while Kim prefers growing from seed. The oysterplant (*Mertensia maritima*), and rock samphire (*Crithmum maritimum*) are among those that Rob is currently propagating. Other plants that customers are dubbing must-haves include cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) and bee – or white – sage (*Salvia apiana*), both of which are often in short supply.

"After 45 years you need a challenge!" says Kim. "I'm not a painter so my art is choosing plants for the garden that have different textures, colours and habits. It is not just about the sale bench... for me the plant always comes first and foremost." ■

Kim and Rob Hurst open their garden annually for a series of special open days and 'afternoon tea in the garden' visits. For dates in 2021, their 45th anniversary year, visit thecottageherbery.co.uk, Group visits should be booked in advance by emailing thecottageherbery@gmail.com

Above Beautiful views over the Worcestershire countryside.

Right *Sanguisorba hakusanensis* 'Lilac Squirrel'.

Far right *Cenolophium denudatum* 'Baltic Parsley', one of many umbels Kim grows here.



The Root of the MATTER

Kim and Rob Hurst advise on successfully growing herbs in peat-free compost mixes

Use a peat-free seed compost to get the best results for seeds and cuttings. The nutrient level in a general compost is much too high for very young plants.

Always pot on your plants before they show signs of stress due to lack of nutrients. If they're allowed to get stressed they won't be as healthy and strong as they could be.

We have used coir-based compost for many years and know that it needs careful handling. Don't be too firm as you re-pot. A light touch when you pot on will ensure that it won't be compacted and the root growth compromised.

Never overwater coir. Its USP is that it absorbs water quickly and holds it well.