



Grasses, *verbena bonariensis*,
salvias and cannas growing
at height

Holiday vibes in an inland town garden

Our writer is surprised to discover an urban garden in Hockley full of the sort of coastal plants she grew up with in the southern hemisphere

WORDS: Barbara Segall PHOTOS: Karen Mann



Karen Mann

PHOTO BARBARA SEGALL

Sometimes you step into a garden and you remain firmly in the present, at other times a garden can transport you somewhere else entirely. This is just what happened to me at Kamala, Karen Mann's wrap-around-the-house garden of a third-of-an-acre. For most of her high-summer garden visitors it holds a bright and zingy display of late-summer into autumn perennials, shrubs as well as annuals. But for me the cannas, dahlias, brugmansias, gingers, bananas and grasses are among the plants that take me to coastal gardens and holiday places. And adding to that illusion are the calls of the Amazon parrots that live in the garden's aviary.

This gem of a garden, hidden behind houses off the main road through Hockley, is an expression of Karen's enthusiasm for plants of all types and demonstrates her skill in planting vibrant colour combinations, as well as growing and propagating tender perennials and annuals.

Karen is the sole gardener here. She has always loved gardening and has created borders that appear to run around the garden like rivers of colour, ranging from mauves and pinks, through to orange and dark magenta to black. Perhaps it is the richness of the colours and the high-density of her plantings that transport me to a holiday setting.

For Karen, the plants that she gives the most garden room to are tender perennials, many of which she increases by taking cuttings, or freshly sowing seed. Dug up in the autumn, they are over-wintered in her greenhouses and the summerhouse. They include dahlias, salvias, cannas, gingers, brugmansia, ornamental bananas and grasses. Once they are lifted, Karen applies spent mushroom compost in bulk to improve the soil.

This annual movement of plants in and out of the garden into shelter is a positive action that gives her the opportunity to redesign her garden every year. Whenever she is garden-visiting herself, which she admits is rarely, she absorbs ideas and thinks about what she might change in her own borders. As the plants mature in the greenhouses and when all danger of frost is past, she >



Inside Karen Mann's greenhouse

PHOTO BARBARA SEGALL





Canna flowers

begins the task of bringing the plants out and setting them in the places she hopes to plant them for the season.

PACKED BORDERS

'I like every border to be absolutely packed with plants and for there to be a range of heights, particularly those that will block out less pleasing views or fences,' says Karen, as she hauls plants in and out to fill the borders for their late-summer show-stopping performances. Aeoniums are perhaps the plants that give me that holiday feeling

DAHLIA DELIGHTS

Dahlias at ground- and fence-level are among the plants that provide eye-popping colour. One in particular that Karen found growing as a seedling in the garden is, she thinks, a cross between a tree dahlia, *Dahlia* 'Excelsia Penelope' from Crûg Farm Plants, and the anemone-flowered *Dahlia* 'Blue Bayou'. The new dahlia was recognised by the Royal Horticultural Society Dahlia Group and officially named *Dahlia* 'Jake Mann' after Karen's son who died in 2014, and in whose memory

'Once a group of rambling roses has finished flowering, numbers of *Abutilon* 'Red Tiger' will take over, rising up to cover fences'

most. Whorls of dark foliage, followed, in sunny sites and circumstances, by yellow flowers, remind me of hot terraces and summer drinks in southern Europe. At Kamala they are mature plants that Karen shelters in winter and brings out into the border in summer.

Many of the plants in the garden are 'on duty', performing the important task of climbing along and up the boundary fences to screen the garden, providing swathes of foliage and flower colour that hold the garden in a hug of beauty.

Among these climbers are a white-flowered form of the annual climber, black-Susan or *Thunbergia alata*. Karen also grows the orange to amber, sunset shades of this climber.

Roses too, are put to work as screening plants.

Once a group of rambling roses has finished flowering, numbers of *Abutilon* 'Red Tiger' will take over, rising up to cover fences.

'I want these plants to screen out anything that is ugly and to fill the garden with loveliness,' says Karen. 'The plan is that, come August, you don't see any fences, nor any soil, as the borders are so full.'

she has opened the garden annually ever since for the National Garden Scheme. *D.* 'Jake Mann' reaches a great height and carries its deep pink-magenta flowers non-stop throughout the summer. Karen has planted it in great swathes in many parts of the garden as it does so well in the height stakes, as well as providing excellent flower and foliage colour. Another dahlia she plants in quantity is 'Waltzing Matilda'.

At a lower level heat-loving salvias play a strong game, with bright pink *Salvia* 'Cerro Potosi', *S.* 'Phyllis Fancy', *S.* 'Super Trooper', *S. involucrata* and *S. curvifolia*, offering colour from spring to later autumn. *S.* 'Ember Wish' is another of the salvias that Karen favours, as they are so reliable and keep on flowering.

Cannas also come into their own at this level. *Canna* 'Mystique', with mahogany-coloured leaves, *C. australis*, *C.* 'Tropicana Black', *C.* 'Panache' and *C. x ehemanii* leading the colour charge in their foliage as well as their slightly pulled-back flowers. Karen grows them mainly for their height and foliage rather than their flowers, but she does let them flower. *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo' with purple foliage is a foil for many of the strongly coloured >



Height from cannas helps to screen fences and cover the ground

dahlias. Karen doesn't like the flowers of 'Diabolo' but does find the foliage to be such a distinctive shape and colour. Other plants that she favours for foliage or flowers colour are the fig 'Crystal Ice', with deeply cut leaves and the Mexican sunflower, *Tithonia*, with its zingy orange flowers. The foliage of *Polygonum* 'Red Dragon' and the plumes of *Miscanthus nepalensis* also add to the height of borders, as well as the need to cover the soil.

Trees are not left out of the mix but are part of the permanent garden, with *Acer palmatum*, a golden catalpa, *Catalpa aurea*, and *Cercis* 'Forest Pansy' included.

Of a particular note is the Chinese allspice, *Sinocalycanthus*. Karen grows ferns and a tree fern in the shade provided by these trees.

Although the plantings evoke memories of coastal gardens of my childhood, I would suggest that you stay in the moment when you visit and enjoy this garden for its colour and the way it leads your eye and mind to more tropical shores than ours. ●

GOOD TO KNOW

Open Days

Kamala 262 Main Road, Hawkwell, Hockley SS5 4NW is open on Saturday and Sunday August 22 and 23 from 11am-4pm in support of the National Garden Scheme.

Entrance £6, children free.

Tea, coffee and cake are available.

Further reading

If you want to visit a coastal garden from the comfort of your own home, there are plenty to read about in my own book *Gardens by the Sea* (Frances Lincoln, out of print, but try second-hand online bookshops such as worldofbooks.com) and *The Coastal Garden* by Sorrel Everton (Phaidon, £39.95). Both of these books will transport you to a number of different seaside locations and could help you identify the plant palette you might need to grow the seaside in your own garden.