

# Gardeners' world



**SUSIE WHITE** tours the world via the vast variety of flowers and plants which adorn John and Sheila Richards' breathtaking, globally inspired garden in Hexham



*Sheila's free-flowing border of day lilies, geums, euphorbia and bistort*

Back in the mid-1990s, I joined a botanical tour of Crete in a particularly good spring for the island's flora. Run by the Alpine Garden Society, the tour was led by Professor John Richards of the Department of Biology at Newcastle University. It was there that I saw *Gladiolus italicus* blooming throughout many acres of stony upland fields, inspiring me to grow the similar *Gladiolus byzantinus* back home in Northumberland. Slender and graceful with magenta flowers, it is one of the loveliest of summer bulbs.

Memories of that trip resurfaced last June when I visited John and his wife Sheila's garden in Hexham. The couple

have lived at High Trees, at the bottom of Gallowsbank, for 33 years and have made an exceptional garden packed full of special plants. John has travelled all over the world collecting plant material under licence, often accompanied by Sheila. Of these many trips, John has visited Yunnan in China three times (a Mecca for botanists), the Rockies three times, the French Alps, the Pyrenees, Borneo, Malaya and Greece, which he has visited more than 65 times. In 1999, he led an Alpine Garden Society seed-collecting expedition to the extreme northern borders of Greece and some of those plants still grow in his Northumberland garden.

Now retired, John is emeritus professor of botany at the University of Newcastle. He's an expert in many fields of research, particularly in primulas, for which he has written one of the chief textbooks. He is also known for his work with helleborines and dandelions. John even has a dandelion named after him, *Taraxacum richardsonianum*, about which he is modest. "Everyone who has anything to do with dandelions, has a dandelion named after them!" he laughs.

On an international dandelion excursion back in 1980, John spotted cow parsley with purple-black foliage growing in a lane west of Mapledurham in Berkshire.



*John and Sheila Richards in their garden*



*A cascade of flowers on Rhododendron 'Pink Pearl' (photo: David Oakley)*



*The hanging lanterns of Crinodendron hookerianum*

"It stood out amongst all the greenery," says John, "and I thought 'what on earth is that?' Because we were on a dandelion excursion, we all had trowels, so I dug up a couple of its carrot-like tubers to grow it on in Northumberland, where it started self-sowing." John named it 'Raven's Wing' and from this single discovery it has gone worldwide, becoming highly fashionable and, as John says, "it's always at its best in Chelsea week!"

This delightful, ferny-leaved plant was in flower when I visited John and Sheila's garden last summer, where it is one of the 1,000 different plants in this collectors' garden. "We came here in 1989," says John. "Then it was just a lawn with a house in the middle of it, ringed by mature trees. It was our third house in Hexham, but with the children away at university, we wanted a smaller house and a bigger garden. Half an acre and north-facing (cool for

alpine plants), it was a blank canvas, so it was perfect."

The first thing he did was buy 50 railway sleepers, using them as edgings for beds and for terracing into the sloping bank to grow ericaceous plants such as Himalayan poppies, species of *Meconopsis*. "There was already some 15 tons of Westmoreland limestone," says John, "jumbled up as if a lorry had been and tipped it all, but absolutely lovely. Though it took a lot of shifting, it was very useful for making beds for alpine plants, especially along a terrace that runs the length of the house."

He modelled the front garden, making paths and scree beds, and in all it took about three years for the basic layout. Every year since, the soil has been enhanced using quantities of leaf mould and the contents of three compost heaps. The result is a humus-rich and reasonably fertile soil. "Latterly, I've been doing what I suppose you'd call no-dig gardening," John explains. "If I feel a bed has got tired, I dump on it several barrow loads of leaf mould and compost (both of which are acidic) for it be worked in by







**Blue flowered *Meconopsis gaykiddiana* from Bhutan**



**Containers on the terrace, an eclectic mix of bedding plants and rarities**



**John's discovery, *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Raven's Wing'**



**The vivid red flowers of *Tulipa sprengeri***

worms. In another border I grow on what is essentially a sand bed."

Today, the garden has matured and there are about 80 large shrubs and small trees, including two white-stemmed birches, *Betula jacquemontii*, a peeling barked *Acer griseum* and a handkerchief tree, *Davidia involucrata*, which flowered properly last year for the first time. "It had more than 100 'handkerchiefs,'" says John, "after that I gave up counting!" There are 300 metres of hedges, which makes cutting them a big job, so this is done by Barry Kennedy, and John and Sheila are also helped in the garden by Mandy Mason.

Some alpine plants are quite short-lived so they need regular sowing. John saves his own seed, particularly of *Meconopsis*, some of which is shared through the Alpine Garden Society, of which John is a past president, and the Scottish Rock Garden Club. He raises new plants annually, sowing more than 100 packets a year, always on New Year's Day. There are 150 species grown in containers on the long terrace where little gems of plants can be displayed and given the right conditions. John is a regular exhibitor at alpine garden shows such as the twice-yearly events at Hexham Mart. And for early in the year there are snowdrops, some 50 or 60 different types, including a few that he has introduced to cultivation such as an upward-facing double he named 'Mini Muffin'.

It is Sheila who planned out the lovely borders of herbaceous plants, filling them with swathes of colour in dynamic



***Meconopsis robusta*, a delightful rarity**

combinations; orange geums with pink plumes of bistort and yellow trumpets of day lilies with vibrant orange *Euphorbias*. "Sheila has recently built a most marvellous grass garden," says John, "which in autumn is full of late-flowering grasses, striking and full of texture. There's a pampas grass with plumes about 15ft high surrounded by stripy-leaved zebra grasses."

This combination of flowing borders of cottage garden plants with a specialist collection of alpine plants makes this a beautiful garden. Sun-loving plants flourish on the terrace where lilies, Pasque flowers, *Tulipa sprengeri* and alliums are mixed with pots of colourful annuals. *Rhododendrons*, their



**Pale pink flowers of *Allium carinatum v pulchellum***



**The sunlit glade of the garden in June**

foliage hidden by huge balls of cerise or mauve flowers, cascade into borders of tree peonies and ferns. *Clematis* scrambles over a shed and shady places are enlivened by the rhythmic leaf patterns of Solomon's seal, *rodgersia* and delicate-looking *thalictrums*.

Most years, John and Sheila open their garden as part of Hexham's Hidden Gardens, an annual tour of a number of gardens in the town. Theirs is a garden that works on many levels, the tiered planting making it good for wildlife. Beneath tall



***Gladiolus byzantinus* evoking memories of Crete**



**The beautiful blue flowers of *Meconopsis baileyi***



**The peeling bark of *Acer griseum***



***Primula flaccida*, one of John's choice primulas**

trees, *ceanothus* flowers blue in summer and the Chile lantern tree displays its crimson hanging bells. Pale globes of alliums punctuate Sheila's new grass garden and country garden lupins fit just as well with rare irises or poppies. This is what changes it from being a museum collection of plants to a multi-layered, peaceful and relaxing garden.

**Susie White is a garden writer and photographer, a member of the Garden Media Guild and a finalist in the guild's Journalist of the Year Award 2022** ■

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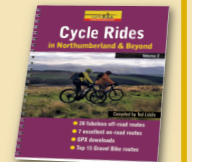
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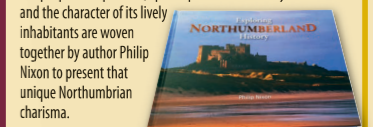
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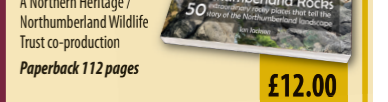


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