

A *walled* WONDER

A Victorian garden is being sensitively restored to create a plant-lover's paradise – a nursery packed with a tempting range of perennials, annuals and more

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANNAICK GUITTENY • WORDS BY STEPHANIE DONALDSON

OPPOSITE Branching *Verbena bonariensis* and bright annuals fill the old pond
THIS PAGE Red-hot pokers provide a fiery focus in a long border by the glasshouses



Emma Davies first saw The Walled Nursery 25 years ago, while accompanying a friend who was feeding some resident goats. “The glasshouses were derelict, with rotten wood and glass hanging down,” she recalls. “I couldn’t believe she was going to risk walking through them and insisted we put cardboard boxes on our heads!”

Despite the dangers, Emma fell for the place and dreamt of taking it on. “It has the most wonderful atmosphere,” she explains. “Echoes of its past are apparent everywhere – it has a precious quality worth preserving.” The three-acre walled garden, with its 13 late-Victorian Foster & Pearson greenhouses, is part of what was once a grand estate (now an independent school) near Hawkhurst in the High Weald of Kent. In its early 20th-century heyday, it would have bustled with activity, employing nine full-time gardeners to supply produce and flowers for its owners.

Scroll forward to today and professional gardeners Emma and her husband Monty are in charge of what they call ‘The Demanding Ladies’, although it has been a long and rocky road to get here. The largest ‘lady’, the 47-metre-long vinery – now made safe and glazed with modern lightweight materials – houses a shop full of tempting gardenalia and vintage tools, as well as the Vinery Café, where breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea are served using home-grown and local produce. Outside, display beds and wooden sales benches brim with colourful perennials and annuals, 85 per cent of which Emma grows on site.

Fortunately, between them, Emma and Monty have considerable horticultural and business experience – as well as the vast amounts of energy required to get such an undertaking onto a firm footing. Emma brought Monty to see the site soon after they met at Hadlow College in the late 1990s, where she was studying horticulture and he landscape management. “It was already being run as a nursery by then, so we asked the owners to contact us if they ever decided to sell,” Emma says. “Happily, they had managed to save the glasshouses from total ruin but their budget for restoration was very limited so there was still a real danger they would have to be demolished.”

In 2009 they finally received the call. “They gave us six months before putting it on the open market, so we sold our house and gardening business, borrowed as much money as we could and took over in January 2010, moving into the far-from-luxurious gardener’s bothy on site with our toddler Rufus and two-month-old baby, Tommy.”

Emma’s initial instinct was to tidy everything: “Luckily, Monty guided me away from that – we’d never have got the business going,” she explains. They knew the restoration of the glasshouses would be a long-term project so, once some had been made safe and others closed off, they focused their energies on the nursery, propagating and growing-on choice plants that would draw in the customers.

Emma has worked in two of England’s greatest gardens – Great Dixter and Sissinghurst – where she built up extensive plant knowledge and experience. While still



THIS PAGE, ABOVE Emma and Monty Davies, owners of The Walled Nursery **LEFT** Vibrant pink *Salvia* ‘Wendy’s Wish’ is one of the many distinctive varieties for sale **OPPOSITE** Beside the old peach glasshouse, wooden staging holds an array of plants to tempt customers, including colourful *Diascia fetcaniensis*, salvias and buddlejas, ideal for sunny borders





CLOCKWISE, FROM THIS PICTURE Benches and a shepherd's hut are placed so customers can admire the planting in the old pond; vivid tassled flowers of *Emilia javanica*; vintage gardening tools and stylish deckchairs are on sale in the Vinery shop

at college, she was taken on by Christopher Lloyd two days a week as a volunteer at Great Dixter. "I think he liked my enthusiasm but he tested me constantly!" she recalls.

After college, she joined the garden team at Sissinghurst for six years. "It was very different from the informality of Dixter," she says. "We would meet every morning and be allotted tasks so you always knew who was doing what. I'm glad I had both experiences and they have informed how I garden here. I liked Sissinghurst's regimented working style and learnt most of my propagating skills there."

Once Emma and Monty got into their stride, it wasn't long before word began to spread that The Walled Nursery was a good place for well-grown, interesting plants. "We've created a niche in growing and selling annuals," Emma explains. "My time at Dixter and Sissinghurst taught me that if you want to extend seasons and bridge the lulls, annuals are invaluable." Benches overflow with orlaya, salpiglossis, nicotiana, *Linum grandiflorum*, tithonia, emilia (Emma's current favourite) and zinnias. Climbers – including *Mina lobata*, sweet peas and ipomoea – are romping up their supports, and there's a great range of equally tempting perennials, herbs and vegetable plants.

The sunken glasshouse, where melons were grown in the past, is now home to an ever-expanding collection of succulents. "The majority are sedums and sempervivums, which are reliably hardy, as well as many varieties of tender echeverias, crassula and aeoniums," Emma says. "Our favourites for outdoor containers are sempervivums and trailing *Sedum* 'Dragon's Blood', which is beautiful and tough as old boots, with flowers the bees adore."

With a loyal and ever-growing band of customers, the business is thriving and Emma and Monty's tireless efforts have been rewarded with an unexpected donation of £200,000, enabling them to restore up to four central glasshouses. "It's from a lady evacuated here to live with her grandfather, who was head gardener, during the war. She has very happy memories of this place and wants it to be saved," Emma explains. Work starts this year and the couple feel they've been thrown a much-needed lifeline. 'The Demanding Ladies' could not be in better hands. ➔

i *The Walled Nursery, Water Lane, Hawkhurst, Kent (01580 752752; thewallednursery.com).*





EMMA'S GUIDE TO GROWING ANNUALS

Sow in seed pans on a heated bench with a propagation frame over the germinating seedlings

Annuals hate a cold start – sow at the end of March or beginning of April (except for autumn-sown ammi and sweet peas)

Prick out into cells as soon as seedlings are large enough to handle

Once plants start to grow, snip them off just above the second set of leaves to make a sturdy, bushy shape

Pot them on into 7cm pots when they are growing strongly

Nicotiana seedlings are tiny – sow thinly in cells, prick out again into cells until their roots show through the base and then pot on

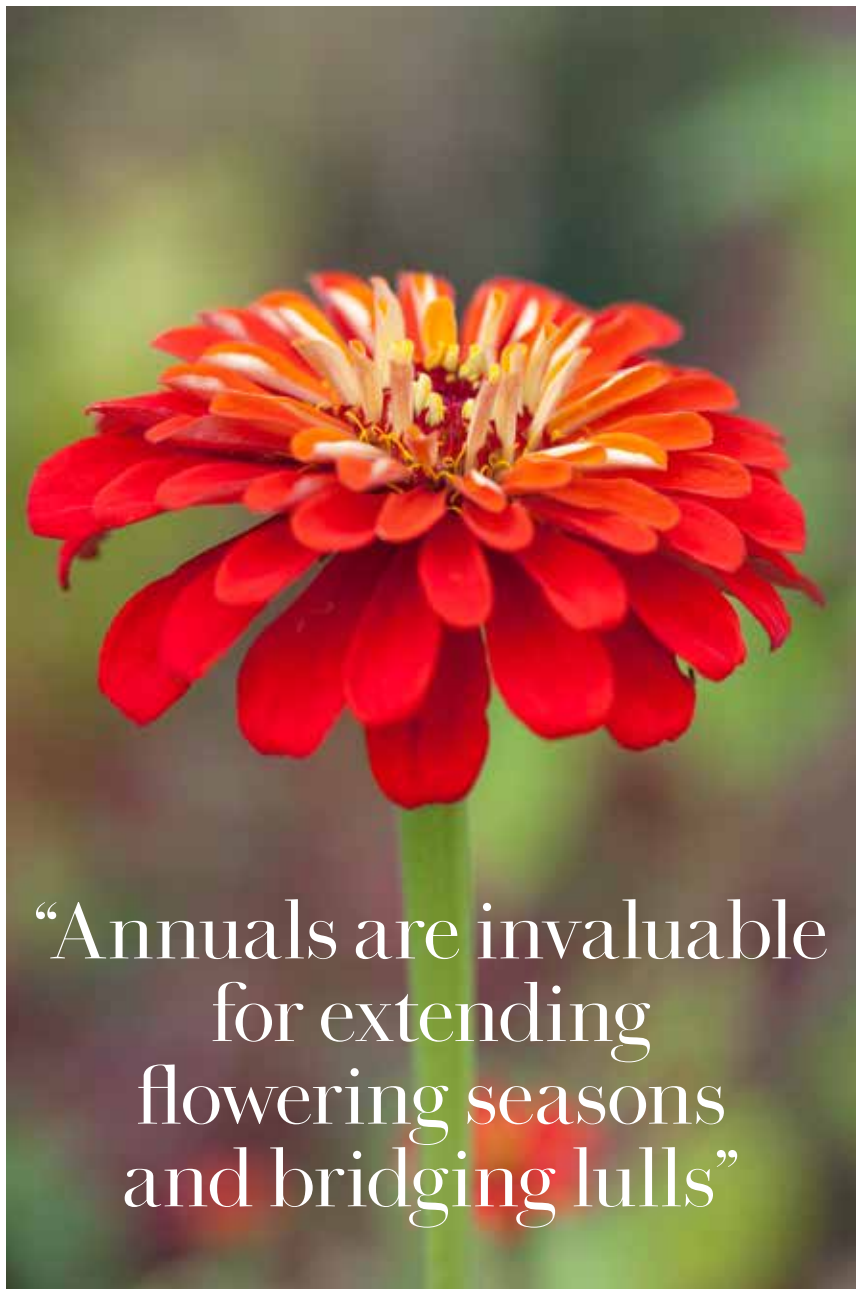
Persicaria orientalis, tithonia and zinnia are very vulnerable to slugs – sow more than you think you will need

Wait for really warm weather to sow climbers like *Mina lobata* and ipomoea or they will sulk and die – or never thrive

Remember to water young plants daily when it is warm and sunny ☀️

CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT Known as Spanish flag, *Ipomoea lobata* is a fast-growing annual climber that produces cascades of distinctive flowers; Emma keeps on top of watering the young

seedlings as they can dry out quickly in the warm glasshouse conditions; the striking trumpet-shaped flowers of *Ipomoea tricolor* 'Blue Star'; fiery *Zinnia* 'Giant Scarlet'



“Annuals are invaluable for extending flowering seasons and bridging lulls”