

Organic approach to production

DANIEL GLASS, SENIOR PLANTSMAN AND CO-FOUNDER, LITTLE COPPICE NURSERY

The vagaries of the past few weeks' weather have done nothing to dampen spirits at the Little Coppice Nursery. Its stock of heritage plants is still growing apace, and the nursery's green credentials netted a win at Capel Manor College's spring show earlier this month.

Little Coppice is all about energy – the natural energy of plants, the ground, and weather – so it comes as no surprise that senior plantsman and co-founder Daniel Glass has boundless enthusiasm for his work.

Using biodynamic and organic principles to propagate and tend his plants, Glass admits that the Buckinghamshire nursery is unlike most others.

"The principles come down to putting a lot back into the property and we use companion planting to control pests," he explains.

"We try to create a level where we have got pests and predators working together. There are no fertilisers, just good, organic compost and everything is hardy.

Within the 2.8ha smallholding in Iver Heath is an area of 30-year-old pine trees, which are slowly starting to come down. The wood is then taken to a sunken burning pit, where it is used to heat metal bins filled with compost for sterilisation.

Water is collected from the on-site well or caught as rain to be used for plant irrigation.

Glass says: "If we work from a high organic principle things work very well.

"Biodynamism is about taking into account that plants are living things, but it is very misunderstood because much of the language can be quite New Age.

"Because there is a lot of apparent mumbo-jumbo it can put people off, but it just comes back to how organic was 20 years ago."

There may be some scepticism, but it certainly hasn't stopped the nursery from becoming a healthy business venture since it launched in 2005 as the brainchild of Daniel and his mother Sarah Glass.

The family connection has been a



definite advantage, says Glass, allowing for some frank and open discussions.

"We know each other's strengths and weaknesses and we have that comfortable relationship where we can criticise or fully praise," he adds.

While drawing customers into the nursery with regular open days is a popular side of the business, the major commercial enterprise comes from setting up stall at farmers' markets across London.

With markets to attend every day, Glass has found the ideas behind Little Coppice have attracted a regular following. "Customers are always saying they have never seen plants looking so healthy," he laughs.

"It is because they are grown in their own natural setting that their beauty really shows. We sell plants when they are not in full flower, so they can come into their own in people's gardens."

The heritage plant production is a particular passion for Glass, who points out a few of his favourites.

Verbena bonariensis, *Lavatera Barnsley* and *Geranium* 'Johnson's Blue' Award of Garden Merit are popular varieties, but Glass also has a strong interest in

medicinal herbs of the 1600s and plants such as Salad Burnett (*Sanguisorba minor*).

He says: "The history side of plants helps connect us further with horticulture and we can see how things go around in cycles.

"Salad Burnett was, apparently, one of English philosopher Francis Bacon's favourite herbs.

"Another heritage variety we grow is *Campanula takesimana* 'Elizabeth', which is hard to find, apart from in specialist nurseries."

One of the successes for the small nursery has been its unique and personal service, which customers are often unable to find in superstore retailers.

Glass explains: "People want something different in their garden and one of the reasons for my interest in the heritage types is that they can help our customers achieve that.

"There is such a range of possibilities that it can be quite hard when certain design styles take off because they will be everywhere and if you're looking for something different it can be difficult to find."

Having such a small space to work with has, so far, not been an obstacle for the nursery, but Glass says there is only limited expansion in terms of planting that will be possible as demand grows.

The diversity of customers buying into the principles that Little Coppice promotes is astonishing – with as many people in the 18 to 30 age range as there are older homeowners purchasing the nursery's plants.

Glass says: "A nursery like ours has so much potential for the future as people's buying habits and attitudes change.

"But we're not necessarily aiming for vertical expansion by making more profit each year. We would be looking to diversify more into education projects for schools, and expanding work we currently do helping with garden maintenance for elderly people.

"People are getting more switched on and it is lovely to see how the farmers' markets have taken off."

Magda Ibrahim

CV

2004-2007 Degree in political science at Goldsmiths University

2005 Co-founds Little Coppice Nursery and begins work as part-time plantsman

2006 Completed City & Guilds in organic growing, garden design and garden history

2007-date Full-time plantsman at Little Coppice Nursery. Gains RHS Advanced Certificate

2008 Little Coppice Nursery wins the Green Award at Capel Manor College's spring show