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Compiled by Tiffany Daneff

Insideout

Field of dreams

Charlie Ryrie longed to try running her own cut-flower business – but discovered that the rural idyll can be jolly hard work

Words Tiffany Daneff
Photographs Paul Debois

Pick of the bunch
Swathes of ranunculus
ready to pick

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE a more perfect-sounding life than Charlie Ryrie's. Her children grown up, she ditched the desk job, moved close to the Welsh borders and in 2006 bought a field from a local farmer. There she planted a cutting garden on the sunlit slopes overlooking Hay-on-Wye, and now sends out her pretty home-grown bouquets all over the country.

With her cocker spaniel, Mouse, she is up early each morning to pick the sweet peas and cornflowers and bring back armfuls of phlomis and buckets of campanulas, astrantia and alchemilla, which are taken to the barn for sorting, cleaning and arranging: either for weddings – now the bulk of the business – or to be sent out by mail order. Her look is of the moment: natural sprays of *Ammi majus*, crocosmia, bluebells and scabious, arranged in an assortment of found vases and containers, from pretty floral jugs to old stoneware pots.

The view from the picking field – three acres of gently sloping Herefordshire soil – is wild and open, stretching from the foothills of the Brecon Beacons all the way to

You're on to a winner if you work with flowers: they bring out a smile in people

the gaunt rump of Hay Bluff. And, says Charlie, you're on to a winner if you work with flowers because they bring out a smile in most people.

So, every bit the rural idyll. Or it would have been, were it not for the clouds that rose in the Black Mountains and dumped their loads for what, to Charlie, felt like every single day of last summer. The downpours turned the rich Herefordshire clay into a claggy boot camp and flattened the cosmos and phlox and row upon row of sorry bridal blooms. She lost all her first sowing of annuals, all the ▶

It is not easy turning a rough and weedy pony pasture into growing beds



Blooms with a view
Charlie Ryrrie stands
knee-deep in spikes of
Tellima grandiflora

◀ winter sowings were drowned and what the rain didn't take was devoured by rampant slugs.

'It was the worst summer since I picked up a trowel,' says Charlie, aged 56. 'I almost lost the plot with it. The previous year we had done squillions – it was such a good summer. With weddings you take bookings in advance so we had all these orders to fulfil. I had to scurry around to find larkspur – usually we had half an acre of it.' Somehow she managed to find enough for the weddings, where at least the flowers aren't expected to last more than a day, but the mail order side of the business was a disaster: 'You can't send out damp flowers.' Then, when things could hardly get worse, she and her husband parted company.

When I rang recently to catch up with Charlie again, it was a relief to hear that this spring things were on the up. Not just that, but she was planning a fairly major expansion, moving into her mother's house in Dorset, where a second cutting garden was at planning stage.

'Everything takes longer than you think,' says Charlie, who wakes at 5am, has a cup of tea and checks her emails. She is picking flowers by

6am, when the stems are turgid. Her helpers arrive at 7am: it takes at least two people working two full days to prepare for a big wedding.

Take heed anyone who fancies embarking on a similar project: it is not easy turning a rough and weedy pony pasture into growing beds.

'I dived in too quickly,' Charlie says. Despite her horticultural training, she struggled to establish the grounds at Hay. Even after sowing the field with green manure and spreading it with the contents of several 20-tonne trucks full of sterilised municipal garden waste, and planting hornbeam windbreaks, the site remained windy and weedy.

The move to Dorset brings with it not just an easier growing space, but the promise of new flowers. The garden is more protected and much warmer, so Charlie hopes to grow peonies and tender perennials.

If her plans to create an almost completely perennial cutting garden (that is also low maintenance) work out, then perhaps, at last, she will be able to enjoy her dream. ◆

To order Charlie Ryrrie's flowers, visit cutflowergarden.co.uk or call 01308 427355

Charlie's perennial favourites

Hellebores Contrary to popular opinion, they cut well and keep for a week if plunged up to their necks in cold water as soon as they're picked. Such a joy in late winter – for months in the garden and indoors in a vase.

Veronicastrum virginicum Statuesque plants with long-lasting spikes of creamy, pink or lavender flowers in summer – more reliable than veronicas.

Astrantia 'Roma' Pale to darker pink, vigorous, repeat flowering, beautiful.

Phlox paniculata 'David' A well-scented white phlox; an excellent border plant and repeat flowering if cut back hard. If you prefer pink, go for 'Eva Cullum', a butterfly magnet and striking colour.

Nepeta parnassica Tall (1.5m/5ft) upright and floriferous catmint with spikes of lavender flowers over a long period.

For fabulous foliage

Who wants eucalyptus in a garden? Try these instead:

***Phlomis italica* (Balearic island sage)** or, if it's too tender for your garden, ***Phlomis fruticosa* (Jerusalem sage)** Really good downy grey foliage on bushy plants; an excellent foil to evergreens in winter and pretty all year round.

***Rhamnus alaternus 'Argenteovariegata'* (Italian buckthorn)** Brilliant evergreen with attractive rather than boorish variegation. Takes a year or two to establish but then likes being picked hard.

***Salvia officinalis* (common sage)**

An unmissable herb for foliage.

***Lonicera fragrantissima* (winter-flowering honeysuckle)** Fresh bright green leaves on loosely arching branches for much of the year, after wonderful scented winter flowers.

Stephanandra incisa Shrub with small maple-shaped leaves that turn all shades of red and butter yellow in autumn.

Putting on a show

Charlie uses all kinds of containers for flowers, many collected in auctions and bric-a-brac shops. Her favourites include classic creamy-white Constance Spry vases, vintage enamel and cut-glass jugs, old jam jars, big urns and a huge blue glass Romanian pickle jar.



Cottage-garden style
Peonies, camassia,
ammi and more (above);
bupleurum foliage and
flowers (right)



Pretty in pink
A jug of sweet
williams (left);
fresh-cut stems of
persicaria (below)