

What was once a derelict farm in the tiny village of Thistleton, near the border of Rutland and Lincolnshire, is now home to approximately 400 varieties of herbs, both culinary and medicinal. Known simply as The Herb Nursery, it is run by the Bench family. Four decades of growing experience have left the owner, Peter, with an inimitable knowledge of these plants.

Within the 4-acre farm and its sunny courtyard thrive rare and unusual herbs, many of which are only stocked here in the UK. More than 50 varieties of thyme and 40 forms of mint are grown at Thistleton. Other culinary favourites include chives, fennel, oregano and rosemary, while still more are grown for their ornamental beauty.

“We like to stock herbs that are a bit different because it has more interest for us,” says Peter’s wife Christine. “We like quirky plants. They have limited sales admittedly, but it’s nice when we can help people who have been looking for a rare herb. We’re often the last place they have to look.”

From derelict buildings

The venture started nearly 40 years ago, when Peter moved to the farm with his parents and sister, Sally, in 1976. Even before this, the family were keen gardeners, producing home-grown vegetables and selling the surplus.

“My father wanted more space,” says Peter. “It was the height of the self-sufficiency movement in the ’70s. Although my father wasn’t a follower of fashion, the idea of being self-sufficient was a lifelong dream for him. He wanted a patch of land big enough for him to watch the pheasants roaming across.”

Back then, the farm presented a huge challenge. The buildings were derelict, having been uninhabited for years. “Our first Christmas dinner was eaten in a kitchen with its roof propped up with stones and steel bars,” remembers Peter.

The family worked hard, and the farm soon became a thriving, productive smallholding, complete with goats and poultry. The sheltering walls offered ideal growing conditions, but the old farmyard where the nursery now sits was a less than ideal spot to till the soil. Decades of compacted stone had to be dug out and soil imported to create planting beds. In places,

Highly aromatic and very rare, *Lavandula viridis* is known as the yellow or green lavender.



Taking fresh cuttings to use in the kitchen.



USEFUL PLANTS A herb is any plant, or part of a plant, which can be used for food, flavouring, medicine or fragrance. The usefulness of these plants means they have been traded and distributed around Europe for many centuries. The trade in herbs and spices across Europe and into Britain dates back to Roman times. Many plants that are a familiar part of the British landscape, such as fennel and wild thyme, and even weeds, such as dandelion and ground elder, were in fact introduced as herbs by the Romans.

planting holes had to be made with a pickaxe.

At first, the family produced a range of vegetables that they sold at the garden gate. Herbs were a side interest, grown as seedlings in old yogurt pots by Peter’s mum, Nancy. They soon came to play a bigger part.

“Herbs were a lifelong interest of my mother,” says Peter. “She was interested in herbal remedies well before it was fashionable. Some thought we were cranks. It certainly wasn’t mainstream to grow herbs at that time.”

Soon, however, as people became more adventurous with their cooking, interest in culinary herbs increased in the 1980s. By this time, Peter had been to horticultural college, and returned with new ideas to help run the family business. The Herb Nursery was born.

Nancy has long since stepped back from the business into a well-earned retirement, but the nursery remains a family affair. Sally is the chief propagator, and they have been joined by Christine, who has a special interest in scented pelargoniums. Alongside the herbs, they make a heady mix.

Lavender garden

One of the most attractive areas is a formal box-hedge knot garden. Created in 2000, this is home to a collection of lavenders. Here grow the classic English and French varieties, such as ‘Munstead’ and the white-flowered ‘Snowman’, both 18in (45cm) tall. Joining them are others, more rare and unfamiliar. These include a wild form, *Lavandula canariensis*, a