

FOR MEDICINE AND ORNAMENT

Growing alongside the culinary herbs are ones with medicinal uses and those with ornamental value. “Some have obscure, ancient medicinal properties, which are only now being rediscovered,” says Peter. For example, the leaves of *Cardamine pratensis*, or lady’s smock, were once used as a substitute for pepper. The African bulbine, *Bulbine frutescens*, is a succulent relative of aloe vera that has the same medicinal properties. “It can be used to treat light burns, but it is also highly ornamental, flowering almost constantly, with small orange flowers,” he says. It is also smaller than aloe vera, easily ensconced on a kitchen windowsill.

Vitex agnus-castus is a Mediterranean shrub, with spikes of blue flowers. Research has shown it to have an effect on hormone levels and alleviate premenstrual syndrome, though its mechanism is not fully understood. It is often known as the chaste tree.

“We stick to the old favourites for cooking, and use peppermint and camomile for tea, but Peter’s mum knows how to use the medicinal herbs. She has had formal training, as the preparation is often very technical. One lovely use is simply to cut the fragrant flowers and foliage for indoor arrangements,” says Christine.

Borage, with its luminescent blue flowers among its hairy leaves and stems, is used as a base oil for perfumes. Peter and Christine also recommend using the flowers as an ingredient in Pimm’s and summer salads.

Among the ornamental plants is the Jekyll and Hyde plant, *Phytolacca americana*. This is a medicinal herb, also known as pokeweed, but is poisonous if not prepared in the correct way, hence its name. However, it has beautifully architectural foliage and red stems. “It’s very showy, and a talking point,” says Christine. “We once supplied it for medical research, which was very exciting.”



***Phytolacca americana* can reach 8ft (2.5m) in height. The green to white flowers are followed by dark purple berries. All parts of the plant are toxic.**



at the top of each stalk. These subsequently bend down to the ground and take root, growing a new plant. Hence the onion can ‘walk’ around a patch of ground.

“Some herbs are often rare because they are difficult to propagate,” says Christine. “We’re willing to make the effort.”

Unusual favourites

These herbs are complemented by an array of traditional favourites, such as thyme and mint, although many are also unusual varieties.

Rarely growing more than 8in (20cm) high, thymes either hug the ground or form low clumps. They have small leaves, kept neat and tight with regular trimming. The most common variety is *Thymus vulgaris*, a bush dwarf shrub, with small, aromatic dark grey-green leaves, and spikes of small white or pink flowers.

Among the 50 varieties at the nursery are many with bright variegation to the leaves, including the yellow-leaved ‘Archer’s Gold’ and ‘Bertram Anderson’. Others have unexpected flower colour, such as the dark crimson flowers of ‘Purple Beauty’ and the red blooms of ‘Redstart’.

All are grown for their intense flavour and scent. Thyme ‘Fragrantissimus’ is orange scented, while *T. herba-barona* is a creeping form with a caraway flavour.

Another collection of perennial herbs that introduces new flavours and scents is mint. As well as the common peppermint and spearmint, the nursery has varieties with citrus notes of lime, grapefruit or lemon, such as *Mentha x piperita* f. *citrata* cultivars ‘Lime’, ‘Lemon’ and ‘Orange’. Eucalyptus mint, another herb stocked only at Thistleton in the UK, has an even stronger menthol perfume than any other mint. The scent of pears is captured in the leaves of mentha ‘Sweet Pear’ while *M. piperita* ‘Strawberry’ has a delicate strawberry scent. A related variety is known as the eau de Cologne mint, because of its highly perfumed, bronze-coloured foliage. The classic apple and chocolate mints are also in the collection, well known for their delicious sweet flavours.