



Looking after the plants at The Herb Nursery.

Two more types grown only at Thistleton are Asian mint, *Mentha asiatica*, and 'Julia's Sweet Citrus' mint. The former has small grey leaves and pale lilac flowers, while the latter is a new cultivar, with citrus scented leaves. All these grow to between 15-24in (40-60cm) tall.

Attractive annuals

As well as the perennials, annual herbs star in the nursery. One is basil, or ocimum. Due to its tenderness and ability to germinate and grow quickly, this is grown from seed each year. The Benches grow exotic Asian varieties, including *Ocimum x citriodorum* 'Siam Queen', which has a spicy flavour. It has dark and very decorative foliage, with pink flowers. Another rarity is *Ocimum sanctum*. "This is sacred basil from Thailand, where it's grown around Buddhist temples," says Peter.

He recommends ocimum 'African Blue', a new type of perennial basil. This was an accidental hybrid between an East African basil and a garden variety called 'Dark Opal'. Thistleton started to stock it six years ago. "It has a fine, delicate flavour and blue leaf markings. It's very showy, but also great for cooking," says Christine. "Because it's a tender perennial that you bring indoors for winter, you can still have it growing in midwinter, and you can have basil in your Christmas cooking."

Search for new plants

The couple read widely about new plant discoveries, and look for new and unusual plants when visiting other nurseries or plant shows. "We often swap plants with other nurseries we meet out and about at shows, or get talking to someone who's been abroad and seen something special, then follow it up," says Christine. "We are constantly learning. There's always something new to grow, learn and remember."

Occasionally, a customer will bring them something unusual. "We are the only place in the UK to stock Cretan basil,

"With fennel green, and balm,
and golden pines,
Savory, latter-mint, and columbines,
Cool parsley, basil sweet,
and sunny thyme"

John Keats, 'Endymion'



Clockwise from top left: the unusual Egyptian 'walking' onion; variegated thyme 'Archer's Gold'; eau de Cologne mint; a new basil, delicately flavoured 'African Blue'.

which a customer brought us after a holiday to Crete," she says. "Sometimes people come to us and say 'you need to grow this; it's great' and they pass us a cutting or two."

The search for new herbs never ends. "We're always interested in new varieties," says Peter. "We like to offer a wide range, so there's always something to keep people coming back."

Peter, Christine and Sally work hard to keep their stock truly interesting and unusual. It is a perfect fit for their peaceful, beautiful and hard-worked-for setting. ■

• Words: Melissa Mabbitt • Photography: Richard Faulks

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