



OPPOSITE A winding path allows visitors to study
the National Collection of *aster novae-angliae*.
THIS PAGE *Aster novae-angliae* 'Helen Picton'



Collector's PARADISE

*Nurseryman Brian Ellis has created an impressive collection of asters –
and bred a variety of his own – at his well-stocked garden near Coventry*

TEXT **NAOMI SLADE** | PHOTOGRAPHS **RICHARD BLOOM**

As far as herbaceous perennials are concerned, self-confessed stamp collector Brian Ellis doesn't mess around. Rather than a simple plant-sales venue, his nursery is home to a garden and plant collection that is both persuasive and exciting.

A fusion of prairie and cottage-garden design, the confection of geum, astrantia, heleniums, agapanthus and billowing, airy grasses is interlaced with a network of paths so that they and Brian's National Collections of *Anemone nemorosa*, *Sanguisorba* and *Aster novae-angliae* can be admired from all directions. 'It is an education but a gentle education,' explains Brian. 'It's a working collection, designed to be accessible to visitors, irrespective of expertise. You can be a collector, a botanist or a complete novice but you will find things that are of interest and value.'

Brian and his wife, Steph, met when they were at art college aged 18. He was a painter, she was studying printed textiles; early careers included teaching and designing clothing for their shop in Brixton, before they were bitten by the gardening bug in the mid Nineties.

The garden and its National Collections offers visitors design inspiration and also acts as a stock bed for the asters and other perennials. Although there is a theoretical tension between keeping it looking presentable and chopping up the plants for propagation, one would never know from its lush and healthy good looks. The soil is poor and shallow, so on arrival nine years ago, Brian immediately added lorry-loads of organic matter to improve the quality. 'I still use around 12 tonnes of composted green waste per year, but other than that it is not too demanding,' he says.

Arrayed for easy comparison on the nursery's deepest, moistest soil, *Aster novae-angliae* is a group that sits well with Brian's relaxed approach to horticulture. 'I don't like prima donnas,' he says. 'Asters are easy maintenance; they won't die on you and the novae-angliae group doesn't get mildew or pests, either. They just need splitting in spring every few years to renew them. I never stake them but because I mix tall and short plants together in the garden, they tend not to fallo-

ver. The stems ripen and become stronger that way.'

The hoard started small, with two or three varieties, but rapidly expanded. 'As with collecting stamps, you open the catalogue and go to the page to see what you haven't got,' says Brian. 'I wanted National Collection status and to get it you need 75 per cent of what is available. There is a lot of admin, so you have to be passionate about it.'

Brian propagates all the asters at the nursery himself and is particularly proud of *Aster* 'Glow in the Dark' (5), which he personally bred and named, although it is not, in fact, a novae-angliae. 'It is a cross between *A. laevis* "Calliope" and *A. novi-belgii* "Fellowship" and it has taken the best qualities of both parents,' he says with pleasure. 'As the light goes at the end of the day, you don't see the stems and leaves any more, you just see the glowing flowers – hence the name.'

As the year begins to fade, the harmonious blooms light up the garden. Dark purple *Aster novae-angliae* 'Helen Picton' works well with lavender *A. novae-angliae* 'Foxy Emily' (8); densely floriferous 'James Ritchie' has big, vibrant blue-purple blooms, while *A. novae-angliae* 'Lachsglut' (4) is a pretty, fizzy-pink colour.

'You could pick six varieties with your eyes closed and they would all go together. You don't have to be an artist to mix them, they just quietly hold hands,' says Brian. 'I

plant sedums and grasses in front of them and then forget about them until the end of the year, when you need the fresh colours. Asters are a good workhorse; they are not exotic but then not everything has to be. They are fine as part of the orchestra' □



ABOVE Brian prepares plants for the nursery.

OPPOSITE The extensive collection of *Aster novae-angliae* includes 1 'Herbstschnee' 2 'Lou Williams' 3 'Barr's Blue' 4 'Lachsglut' 5 'Glow in the Dark' 6 'Pink Parfait' 7 'James' 8 'Foxy Emily' and 9 'Andenken an Alma Pötschke.' 5 *Aster* 'Glow in the Dark' was bred at Avondale

Avondale Nursery, at Russell's Nursery, Mill Hill, Baginton, Coventry: 02476-673662; www.avondalenursery.co.uk

