

GROWING STRONG

Those eager to find organic, home-grown, colourful perennials will delight in Stauden Kopf nursery, in the shadow of the Alps in Austria

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IN BRIEF

What An independent, diverse, organic perennial nursery.

Where Austria.

Size Two and a half acres.

Soil Loose, stony soil.

Climate Vorarlberg is a very rainy area with at least 1,000mm of average annual precipitation. The nursery is 440m above sea level.

Hardiness zone USDA 6.

The blooming stock beds of Stauden Kopf, framed by agricultural fields, with the Swiss Alps rising up beyond. Almost all of the herbaceous perennials the nursery sells are propagated on-site from plants growing in the ground.



Thomas and Elke Kopf among the stock beds at their nursery, Stauden Kopf, where they work with a small team and take on several students for training each year.

Few nurseries have as spectacular a setting as Stauden Kopf, nestled in open countryside and framed by the Swiss and Austrian Alps. Thomas and Elke Kopf moved to this two-and-a-half-acre plot on the outskirts of the town of Sulz, in the far west of Austria, in 1998, but the nursery has its origins nine miles to the south, in the town of Frastanz, where Thomas's parents ran a nursery called Blumen Kopf.

In 1986, Thomas began to develop his own range of perennials within his parents' nursery, and five years later, once she had finished her studies in garden and landscape design, Elke joined him. For the next seven years they worked together before finally establishing Stauden Kopf as an independent business in Sulz. This period was an important foundation. "With 12 years' experience under our belts, we had the confidence to move quickly and invest in the site, which was just an open field when we bought it," says Thomas.

The pair planted trees and hedges, which now provide shelter and screen the nursery from the busy road that runs along its northern boundary. On turning into the car park, you are presented with an inviting entrance, edged on one side with a dry-stone wall that Thomas and Elke built themselves, and generous plantings of grasses and perennials. These elegantly laid-out beds are defined by an easy naturalism, with drought-tolerant choices such as salvias and agastache, which are well suited to the nursery's free ▶



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Achillea filipendulina jostles for space with *Agapanthus* 'Kingston Blue' and *Helianthus* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer' in the stock beds. Most of the plants are propagated in the large greenhouse.



Thomas has been perfecting the production of his own potting-mix compost on-site for years. He checks the CO₂ level and temperature of the covered windrows every day to discover if they are ready for turning.

▷ draining, stony ground. The entrance path leads past rows of stock plants, which provide propagation material for the nursery, towards the large greenhouse. In the main sales area, thousands of pots stand in organised beds. The whole space is punctuated with mature trees and shrubs, and the mountains rise up in the distance, offering a dramatic backdrop.

While Elke focuses on the design and maintenance, Thomas leads the production with a team of around three. He visited UK nurseries in 1997 and was particularly inspired by Bob Brown at Cotswold Garden Flowers, and his selection of “good forms of usual plants”. This helped form the basis of an assortment that has been selected for its pest and disease resistance, in particular against slugs.

The nursery secured its organic certification in 2001, but from the beginning the couple have produced their plants organically. “This is simply an approach to life for us,” explains Elke. To ensure this organic standard, they propagate more than 90 per cent of their herbaceous perennials in-house (some woody plants and bulbs are bought in), and do so in their own home-made compost.

The compost is made using the controlled microbial composting (CMC) method where low windrows are regularly turned to maintain aerobic respiration, and a consistent temperature in the middle of the heap of above 60°C. To achieve this, there are many variables that need to be considered, including moisture content and the correct ratio of nitrogen-rich ‘green’ elements (kitchen and garden ▷



The colourful assortment of garden perennials was partly inspired by trips to British nurseries. Despite relatively high rainfall, the soil at Stauden Kopf is stony and well drained, perfect for prairie-style plants such as *Vernonia*, *Helenium* and *Coreopsis*.

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When Thomas and Elke first moved to Sulz, the site was just an open field. They built walls, and planted hedges and trees to provide shelter and define areas. The couple are still developing the garden with help from their landscaper son.

Students discover tricks to persuade seed to germinate and cuttings to root, and the best time to divide a perennial

▷ waste, manure, grass) versus carbon-rich 'brown' elements (hedge clippings and prunings).

Some loam and finished compost rich in microorganisms are scattered across the heaps, which are then turned every day with the help of a special tractor attachment for the first week, and then less as the heaps mature. To gauge the heap's needs, Thomas keeps fastidious daily records of both temperature and CO₂ levels. This remarkable record has allowed him to alter his method and recipe to suit the nursery's unique requirements. The process may be labour intensive, but the pair are convinced by the result – a weed- and pest-free but still microbially rich compost, produced in as little as six weeks.

Thomas and Elke are both in their early sixties but show no interest in slowing down. In 2022, with the help of their youngest son Aaron, a trained landscaper, they completely renovated their personal garden, which lies at the back of the nursery site. They built a series of dry-stone walls and brought in more sand and gravel to create raised planting beds. In July, these beds are a haze of silvery blue *Echinops*, white *Anthemis* and purple *Verbena*. A splash of acid-green provided by *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* cuts through, while *Seseli elatum* subsp. *osseum* and clouds of pastel-pink *Althea cannabina* further soften the scene.

In the display areas, there is a restrained and naturalistic style of planting, but there is plenty of colour to be found in the various

stock planting areas that surround the nursery. "We really want our visitors to see how to use our plants in combinations and inspire them to try different varieties," explains Elke.

As well as inspiring customers, they also hope to inspire the next generation of gardeners through education. "Since the beginning, we have had many trainees who are keen to learn our methods." In many modern nurseries, daily tasks do not require the specific knowledge demanded by more traditional nurseries. By growing the plants on-site as well as propagating them, students learn the behaviour of a specific plant throughout its entire lifecycle. They can discover the tricks to persuade recalcitrant seed to germinate, the idiosyncrasies of certain cuttings to root and the best time to divide a particular perennial. This is important but vulnerable knowledge that cannot be so easily learned from a book. This sort of work allows one to understand plants and the soil but also the local climate – understanding that is blunted in a business model that depends on plants bought in for quick resale.

"We do not have a clear plan for the future of Stauden Kopf," admits Thomas. By leading by example, however, he and Elke hope to encourage a new generation of ecologically minded growers to start their own nurseries. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Find out more about Thomas and Elke's nursery at stauden-kopf.at



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Thomas and Elke's 8 key plants

1 *Bistorta amplexicaulis* 'Fat Domino' Fat, deep-red inflorescences make a bold impact in the border. Has a long flowering period from July until the frosts. Height and spread: 1.2m x 1m. RHS H7, USDA 4a-7b¹.

2 *Allium lusitanicum* An easy border plant with pale-purple spheres in summer, beloved by pollinating insects. Tolerates poor soil and is easily propagated by seed or division. 40cm x 10cm. RHS H6, USDA 5a-8b.

3 *Helianthemum* 'Sahin's Early Flowerer' A popular cultivar that blooms earlier than others. Flamed petals of streaked orange surround a bronze boss and are held on sturdy stems from June to October. Easy in full sun on most soils that are not too wet in winter. 1m x 40cm. AGM². RHS H7, USDA 3a-8b.

4 *Helianthus helianthoides* var. *scabra* 'Venus' Semi-double daisy with large, orange-yellow flowers that are produced from June to September. A compact variety that requires no staking and makes an excellent cut flower. Pest and disease resistant and easy in full sun. 90cm x 60cm. RHS H6, USDA 3a-9b.

5 *Euphorbia seguieriana* subsp. *niciciana* A useful semi-evergreen perennial. Best in poorer soil in full sun, it has acid-green flowers from early June to September. Be wary of irritant sap. 50cm x 45cm. RHS H5, USDA 6a-10b.

6 *Monarda* 'Andre Eve' This strong, purple bee balm is from Ewald Hügin's former nursery in Freiburg, and is resistant to mildew. Its attractive seedheads persist through winter. 70cm x 40cm. RHS H5, USDA 4a-9b.

7 *Salvia yangii* This Russian sage has spires of violet-blue flowers above deeply divided, silver leaves in August and September. Needs full sun. Dislikes winter wet. 1.5m x 1m. RHS H5, USDA 5a-9b.

8 *Agastache* 'Blue Fortune' Thomas and Elke enjoy the intense blue flowers of this long-lived cultivar in place of delphiniums, which they struggle to grow. Prefers full sun and free-draining soil. 1m x 50cm. AGM. RHS H6, USDA 5a-9b.

¹Holds an Award of Garden Merit from the Royal Horticultural Society.
²Hardiness ratings given where available.



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