



# From Seed to Full Bloom

In 2011 two friends who had worked as gardeners on some of Fife's most prestigious country estates turned their knowledge of plants into a business. Five years on East Neuk Perennials is flourishing and its owners have been talking to Nicola Macnaughton about the pleasures and challenges of starting a nursery from scratch.

**W**hen professional gardeners Karen Wilkieson and Sue Rabjohns first met over a cup of coffee at a local fete they didn't know where their shared love of plants would lead, but today they run East Neuk Perennials, a nursery devoted to raising hardy flowers that thrive in the maritime environment of Fife's exposed coastline.

They are based in a corner of Karen's very large garden in the village of Colinsburgh, which is 10 miles from St Andrews, and when they started out they used their shoestring budget of £7,000 to purchase essential nursery items including a polytunnel to raise bedding plants, a greenhouse for establishing seedlings, a potting shed, compost and seeds.

"Setting up a nursery can be very expensive, which is why we took the decision to base ourselves in Karen's back garden so we had no outlay for land" said Sue.

"We started out cautiously – targeting local customers and attending nearby plant sales and fetes where we would take a stall and sell our plants. This gave us the chance to build relationships with local customers, to help them plan their gardens and offer advice on how to grow plants successfully."

Five years down the line, East Neuk Perennials is flourishing, and now sells more than 100 varieties of hardy plants to gardeners across Scotland, as well as to a range of local organisations such as Cambo Estate in Kingsbarns. This year, Karen and





Sue will take a stand at Gardening Scotland at the Royal Highland Centre Edinburgh, where they will build and exhibit their plants on an East Neuk Perennials show garden.

### Finding a niche

“We realised there was a gap in the market for a nursery offering local, hardy plants grown to survive the tough weather conditions of the East Neuk,” said Karen. “This part of the country can be very exposed, particularly to wind and sea spray, and we knew from speaking to other gardeners that they were fed-up of buying plants that flopped the moment they were planted outside.”

While the business has evolved in a number of ways - Karen and Sue now propagate the majority

of their own plants from seed and cuttings, rather than buying them in as plug plants - the focus is still on selling plants that can cope with the climate.

“We often joke that our plants thrive despite us rather than because of us – they’re not kept in polytunnels under cover or in heated greenhouses, but in pots outside where they receive some fairly harsh treatment at times - particularly during the winter months” said Karen.

### Hard graft

Establishing a plant nursery from scratch requires a serious love of plants but it isn’t always easy.

Karen says: “There’s a lot that needs done during the cold months, from repotting and dividing stock





## Top tips for setting up a plant nursery from scratch

- Finding a suitable site for your nursery is fundamental to success. Consider ease of access for suppliers and customers, soil suitability and the availability of a reliable water supply.
- Check with your local authority before setting up a commercial nursery. There will be rules and regulations to adhere to, including insurance, environmental considerations and suitable visiting times.
- Establish a good relationship with a reputable wholesale supplier. Make a list of everything you need for the initial set up – from polytunnels to compost, seeds to pots, greenhouses to buckets – you may get a good deal if you order it all from the one supplier.
- Make a business plan with a rough idea of how you plan to get through year one – it's often deemed to be the toughest year. Include a start-up costs chart and be sure to keep on top of your finances.
- Talk to other nursery owners and ask for their advice. The more you listen and the more you go and see what others are doing, they more you'll learn.

to cleaning polytunnels and the greenhouse, planning plant sales for the new season, pursuing new business opportunities, creating, planting plans for customers, seed sowing and compost preparation. It's important that everything gets done in winter because when it gets to spring it suddenly gets incredibly hectic."

On top of this there can also be unplanned setbacks such as the occasion when a neighbour's sheep got into the nursery and ate an entire delivery of plug plants.

### Controlling costs

Karen says: "Establishing the nursery in my garden. It minimised costs and made it easier to oversee deliveries. However, it does have its drawbacks and it's easy to let the boundaries blur between your business and home life – you have to be very strict and honest with yourself."

### Expert advice

Karen and Sue would advise anyone considering embarking on a similar venture to visit as many nurseries as possible in order to get some idea of what would for them.

Sue says: "It's also really important to take the time to grow the plants to the quality you would be happy to purchase yourself. Get rid of any weak plants and don't be precious – they're not worth the time and effort you have to put into them."



### Notebook

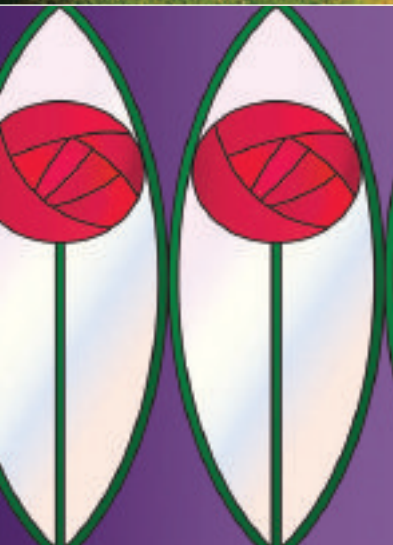
For more information about East Neuk Perennials visit

[www.eastneukperennials.co.uk](http://www.eastneukperennials.co.uk)





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