

Derry Watkins

The self-confessed plantaholic and owner of Special Plants Nursery talks about seeing, looking and her addiction to plants



Photo: Beki Bernstein

My first recollection of being outside in a garden was the courtyard of my parents' house, under the crab apple trees. I was stunned by the bleeding heart flowers there in my mother's garden. I was small enough so I remember them being at eye level. My mother was a passionate gardener. I tried to resist, but really had no choice. Once I got my own bit of dirt, I was hooked.

My most unexpected source of inspiration is my husband, who had never had any interest in plants or gardens. When we moved to a derelict barn in a derelict field 20 years ago, I had no idea how to begin, and he took on designing and building the garden, and he has never looked back. He has a passion for design and for making, and the garden has become his addiction – he will come back from work and start building stone walls. He makes the garden and then leaves

it to me to plant up; he still does not care about plants. I would have had a garden full of beautiful plants without him, but with him I have a beautiful garden.

The book I would most like to pass on to others is *The Well-Tempered Garden* by Christopher Lloyd. It was the first book I ever read which caught some of what I felt about the excitement of gardening. I stayed up all night on a transatlantic plane journey reading it.

I am very nearsighted – almost blind without my glasses, and terrified of losing them – but I am passionate about looking. I have a nearsighted vision of the world – I'm not very interested in views. I love the close-up detail of the individual plant and its relation to its neighbour – I am much more of a plantsman than a designer, and I love colour more than pattern. Having said that, on my mood board I have the Cape Verde islands with their near vertical green terracing; bruised, slubby colours; and moving water.

My sharpest learning curve was exhibiting at shows when the nursery was only a few years old. I learned an enormous amount about how plants did or did not work together in a small space. It was terrifying, exhilarating, exhausting. I gave the shows up after 10 years in order to play with my own garden in the same intense way. Making this garden has been the high point of my life so far. After 20 years, I still have to pinch myself every time I drive down the lane.

If I could wander for eternity in one garden it would be the Drakensburg... or my own garden, provided I was able to garden it – I couldn't love it so well if it was static.

www.specialplants.net

“MY MOTHER WAS A PASSIONATE GARDENER. I TRIED TO RESIST BUT ONCE I GOT MY OWN BIT OF DIRT, I WAS HOOKED”