



Mouse, the cocker spaniel, has the run of Charlie's idyllic hilltop gardens.  
LEFT Charlie fills buckets with "whatever's ready" and makes up her bunches from them, so no two are ever quite the same.



Vases and jugs from local markets and antique shops are full of character, making them perfect to display Charlie's bouquets.  
RIGHT Phlox, yarrow and daisies make a natural, old-fashioned combination.



# A cut above

Four years ago, Charlie Ryrie bought the field next to her cottage near Hay-on-Wye and began a new career – growing cut flowers

WORDS LIA LEENDERTZ PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Charlie gave up her work as a journalist to grow flowers for cutting in the field next to her home, including the gorgeous scarlet blooms of *Crococsmia* 'Lucifer'.



Hazel and willow hurdles help shelter the plants from strong winds in Charlie's spectacular hilltop garden.



Friends, family and volunteer gardeners often stay in this 1950s showman's caravan. RIGHT Blue cornflowers (*Centaurea cyanus*) and the umbel *Ammi majus* 'Queen of Africa' give this bunch a fresh, wild feeling.



cutting garden

If you were to set up a cut flower business, would you do it on a north-facing slope, on heavy, acid clay, in the rain shadow of the Black Mountains? Owner of The Real Cut Flower Garden Charlie Ryrie admits her garden is not the easiest spot: "I fantasise about sheltered gardens and easy-to-work soil, but this is what I've got. It has its problems, but also its advantages." Flowers that survive here are tough, and last well in a vase. "They have struggled, so they have the wherewithal to survive," she says.

Charlie, who lives near Hay-on-Wye with her artist husband, was a feature writer for magazines and newspapers until just a few years ago. Then in 2006 a holiday in Mongolia changed her life. "We spent weeks riding horses around the mountains. When I came back I couldn't settle down to writing. I didn't want to spend my life in front of a computer." So she bought the field that backs on to the house and set about growing cut flowers.

Her love is for "country flowers": simple cottage-garden plants that look like they've been plucked from a garden. This made it easy to start planting: "I just put in things that I liked," she says, "It was no more scientific

than that." There has been a hard process of elimination though. She does well with 'toughies' but had to give up on favourites such as Chinese lanterns (*Physalis*). "They are a weed everywhere else, but I can't grow them."

Charlie grows mainly perennials, such as *Euphorbia*, burnet, bergamot, goldenrod and globe thistles. But a number of annuals are becoming regulars, including delicate *Ammi majus* and frothy *Nigella* (see *Nine of the best cut flowers*, page 46), and some bulbs too. Alliums and gladioli do surprisingly well, and she is getting a bit of a name for her tulips. "I am extravagant with the tulips and shamelessly treat them as an annual crop," she says, admitting that she doesn't even attempt to perennialise them. She grows tulips that can't be found in regular florists' shops, such as the green-flamed *viridiflora*-type 'Spring Green'.

Charlie sells her flowers by mail order and in the market in Hay-on-Wye. She and her assistant Meg Wainwright make up mixed bunches. "People get what they're given," she laughs, "but we always sell out."

Planning a cutting garden is the same, she says, as for a vegetable garden: she wants small amounts to be looking their best all

“ I do fantasise about sheltered, walled gardens and easy-to-work soil, but this is what I've got. It has its problems, but also its advantages ”



Charlie makes up her bouquets in The Flower House, a studio at the top of the gardens. LEFT White *Astrantia major* and *Phlox paniculata* contrast with crimson drumstick alliums and pink *Francoa sonchifolia*.



▷ year. “If there is a time when the garden looks spectacular and loads of stuff is in flower, then I’m not doing it right,” she says.

Early in the year Charlie makes lists, but quickly loses them. Her gardening experience sees her through, as well as a mind that cannot stray far from the garden. “I am a chaotic person, but I must have an organised centre as I find it easy to remember when to order and sow seeds, when to take cuttings.”

She is constantly assessing and re-assessing the flowers, planning the next move. “I lie awake at night thinking about them. I am becoming a really boring person as the garden is on my mind all the time.”

### Living on instincts

Charlie has an instinctive approach to flower arranging – a term that, incidentally, she hates. “I don’t have a technique. I go out and pick a load of stuff the night before and then I enjoy putting the different colours and shapes together. It just seems to work. I don’t want to question it,” she says, superstitiously.

She does believe that being a gardener helps: “If you’ve already chosen a natural palette of flowers to grow, there is a good chance they are going to work next to each

other in a bunch.” But she doesn’t want life to get too easy for the plants. As well as growing long-lasting flowers, there is one other advantage to Charlie’s tough garden conditions: they prove that if she can do it, anyone can. This has become a bit of a mission. “I want to change people’s ideas about cut flowers. I see a renaissance in the British flower growing industry, and I want to encourage that. You can grow so much in one acre – flowers are one of the highest-value crops. There is no need to ship them in from around the world in refrigerated lorries. We can grow such beautiful flowers here, ourselves.” □

### USEFUL INFORMATION

ADDRESS The Real Cut Flower Garden, Walkers Cottage, Clifford, Hereford HR3 5HQ.

OPEN By appointment only.

EVENTS A Garden Fair and Open Garden takes place on 15 August, from 2pm.

TEL 01497 831177

WEBSITE [www.cutflowergarden.co.uk](http://www.cutflowergarden.co.uk)

**BBC** Visit The Real Cut Flower Garden stand in the GARDENS ILLUSTRATED pavilion at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, July 5-11. For details of TV coverage of the show see media listings, page 29.

### Nine of the best cut flowers

#### 1. *Euphorbia schillingii*

Like all euphorbias, this fills up the gaps in a bouquet, providing a foil for other flowers. Charlie loves the colour, too: “A glorious acid green in midsummer”.

#### 2. *Knautia macedonica*

Because of its saturated colour, just a few stems in each bunch will make an impact. “It provides brilliant specks of colour through a bouquet,” says Charlie.

#### 3. *Eryngium planum*

“I love those purply blue heads,” says Charlie. These spiky, architectural stems last for a long time when cut and can also be used dried.

#### 4. *Astrantia* ‘Roma’

“All astrantias are useful, but I love ‘Roma’ for its delicate pinks, which pick up other, stronger colours around it.” She also loves pale green bracts of *A. major* subsp. *involuta* ‘Shaggy’.

#### 5. *Consolida ajacis* Sublime Series purple-flowered

“This has the best, deepest purple colour,” says Charlie. It is a strong, erect form with double flowers, best used for dramatic accents in large arrangements.

#### 6. *Ammi visnaga* ‘Green Mist’

“Gorgeous, much better than any other *Ammi*.” It has tall, huge umbels of delicately spiralling flowers, from white to mid-green, stands well when cut and has feathery, delicate foliage.

#### 7. *Dahlia* ‘Arabian Night’

Charlie grows lots of dahlias for late summer bouquets, but particularly likes the richness of ‘Arabian Night’: “I love this velvety, sumptuous red,” she says.

#### 8. *Nigella hispanica*

“This is the best, darkest coloured nigella, with a spectacular horned seedpod,” says Charlie, who uses the seedpods both fresh and dried.

#### 9. *Catananche caerulea* ‘Alba’

This white cupid’s dart produces its ethereal flowers with gold-brushed stamens all summer long, and adds an airy, delicate touch to bouquets.

