A garden paradise

VILLAGE PEOPLE



For many villagers, a visit to Jim and Sue Stockwell's stunning garden has become an annual event – marking the beginning of spring and providing inspiration for the not so green fingered among us.

The couple have been opening their Denmans Lane garden to the public for the last nine years, and have helped raise more than £78,000 for charity.

It's a labour of love for the pair, who, after beginning their married life with a 'postage stamp' garden, have tended gardens north and south of the country, gaining valuable experience and knowledge along the way.

"We thoroughly enjoy opening our garden and are always amazed at how many people turn up," said Jim. "Even on wet and windy Bank Holiday Mondays, people arrive and shelter, waiting for a break in the rain," added Sue, who keeps visitors warm and happy with tea and homemade cakes.

"It's hard work but fun, and we certainly couldn't do it without help and support from our family and friends," they added.

By Claire Cooper

Jim and Sue were both introduced to gardening at an early age.

"My parents were keen gardeners, and I remember learning the names of plants in our family garden in Norwich," said Sue.

Jim was born in Kent and grew up in Keston, a small village near Bromley. "We had a huge garden - my mother was keen on plants and my father liked digging the flowerbeds," he said.

But it was family friends who nurtured Jim's love of gardening. "My mother's family were in Canada and my father's parents had died, so this couple were like surrogate grandparents to me," said Jim.

"They were keen members of their local horticultural society and encouraged me to grow plants in their garden." Before long, Jim was proudly showing his home-grown fruit, vegetables and flowers such as sweet peas at the Biggin Hill Horticultural Show, often winning awards over older and more experienced gardeners!

The pair met while Jim was studying for a PhD in London, after graduating from Cambridge University with a degree in Natural Sciences. Sue was training to be a nurse at Westminster Hospital. "We met at a disco at St George's Hospital (then located at Hyde Park Corner)," said Sue, who remembers treating several MPs during her time at Westminster. "It was the nearest hospital to the House of Commons," she explained.

The pair married in 1975, moving into their first home in Tooting. "We had a very small postage stamp size garden," Jim recalled. "It suited us as we didn't have much spare time, but we still managed to grow sweet peas."

After completing his PhD, Jim gave up the academic life and joined the coal board on the graduate recruitment scheme and, after working in the head office, opposite Buckingham Palace gardens, Jim accepted a position in Doncaster.

"It was an opportunity for us to move out of London and to afford a house with a bigger garden!" he said. "Property near the northern coalfields was a lot cheaper than London!"

The couple moved to Misson, a picturesque location on the Yorkshire/Nottinghamshire border, where the River Idle ran across the bottom of their garden. "Our house, Ferry Bungalow, was built on the site of the ferry keepers' cottage, where people would be transported across the river to the fields," said Jim.

"We were on a flood plain, and flooded several times, but we loved waking to an overwhelming cacophony of the sound of geese, swans and other wildfowl," added Sue who was now teaching at the Rotherham School of Nursing. Soon, their first child, Daniel, was born.

The couple's next move was to Whickham, a village near Gateshead when Sue was pregnant with their second child, Katharine, who was born two years after Daniel.

A further move, after Jim had been promoted to deputy chief accountant at the South Yorkshire coalfield, saw the family settle in a house with a half-acre garden.

It was a busy time, with Sue working in the community as an evening district nurse and leaving for work as Jim arrived home, but they still found time to revamp the garden.

It was also a stressful time for Jim, as the miners' strike was in full force. "Fortunately, my job didn't involve crossing picket lines, but part of my role was to organise the coaches that would transport the miners who decided to go to work," Jim recalled. "The armoured coaches, complete with steel mesh windows, would leave at 3am."

Following the miners' strike and a management re-organisation, Jim was persuaded to return to head office. Keen to live outside the city, the couple began to explore areas within an hour's radius of Victoria.

During a trip to Sussex, encouraged by coal board staff who lived in Haywards Heath, Jim stayed at The Bent Arms in Lindfield. "I remember sitting at a table outside the former White Horse pub, overlooking the pond and thinking what a lovely place it was," he said.

The family moved to a house in Gatesmead in July 1988.

"We had a much smaller garden but there was a stream down a steep slope to the side and lovely open views across the fields to the railway line, and the most beautiful sunsets," said Sue, who worked part time at the Hurstwood Park ITU unit later moving to a teaching post at the old Cuckfield Hospital and later still, the new Princess Royal.

Jim became one of the first non-executive directors of the newly formed Mid Sussex NHS Trust, attending board meetings in the same building where Sue was based.

After leaving his post as treasurer at the coal board, Jim enjoyed a varied career including three years as a Director with the Medicines Control Agency and Interim Manager with the Surrey Training and Enterprise Council. He also wrote the business case which led to the reform of HM Coroners Service.

Meanwhile, Sue had been enjoying teaching pre and post registration nursing at Surrey University in Guildford, but when she was able to take early retirement, she relished the opportunity to get involved with her local community. "I was a governor at Blackthorns (including four years as chairman) and later a governor at Oathall for many years," Sue said. "During my time, we appointed two head teachers!"

The couple moved to their current home in Denmans Lane in 1995, taking on a huge garden. "At first, we didn't have much time to do anything but cut the grass, but semi-retirement gave us the opportunity to get going again," said Jim.

"We called in a garden designer, Julian Treyer-Evans, who drew up a plan which we implemented."

The stunning one-acre garden is designed for year-round interest, with features ranging from a traditional orchard and herb garden to modern pond complete with black water and floating silver globes.

A circular geodesic dome greenhouse provides space for growing seeds and cuttings, while enjoying views across the allotments, High Street and as far as Ashdown Forest.

The front garden boasts a beautiful wildlife pond, a rose garden and hideaway seating area.

While there are plenty of areas to explore among the various garden 'rooms,' there are also large, lush lawns, tended by son Dan, ideal for family games, entertaining and serving tea to open day guests. There's also an un-mowed area where wildflowers, common spotted orchids and grasses can flourish, attracting insects, butterflies and birds.

Dotted around the garden are sculptures, many of them made by Sue, which form part of an activity trail for younger visitors.

Jim and Sue are active members of Lindfield Horticultural Society, Sussex Gardens Trust and the Hardy Plant Society, where they have made many friends.

Jim spent four years as chair of the Sussex Gardens Trust and still chairs the conservation committee which comments on planning applications that could affect listed gardens. Sue served as chairman of the Hardy Plant Society and currently edits the monthly newsletter.

In 2016, Sue and Jim opened their garden to the public for the first time, following an approach from St Peter and St James Hospice. "We were over the moon to raise £2,000 for the hospice through the sale of plants, tea cakes and jam," said Jim.

The following year, they came up with the idea of a Lindfield Gardens Trail, inviting fellow horticulturalists to take part. The event was a great success raising £6,000 for the hospice. Sue and Jim went on to step up the pace by opening for the National Garden Scheme as well as organising village trails.

In 2020, Covid struck but, when restrictions were eased, Jim and Sue led the organisation of a Front Garden Festival, where visitors could safely view gardens from the road. "It was a nice thing to do as it took people to areas of the village they didn't know, such as side streets and cul-de-sacs," said Jim.

Jim and Sue have two young grandchildren, Cameron and Evelyn, who live nearby and love to visit and play in the garden or build Lego with Uncle Dan. Until Covid, the couple also enjoyed exotic travel in the winter, but last year they took off for a tour of Iceland in June, directly after their final garden opening.

Last month, on Bank Holiday Monday, some 600 visitors streamed through the gates of the nine Lindfield gardens opening this year, raising more than £6,000 for the hospice. With funds raised at other NGS openings and plant sales at Village Day, the total raised for charities in 2024 was over £15,000.

"A huge amount of work goes into organising and planning the trail, and all the gardeners work so hard," said Sue. "It's lovely to share our passion with others, but we also look forward to getting together with the other gardeners to enjoy a celebratory glass of wine when the last guests leave!"

The Lindfield Gardens Trail has continued to flourish and, with so many villagers keen to take part, south and central trails have been created which will run on alternate years – come rain or shine!