

MEET THE KING OF COLOURFUL CONTAINERS



Claus Dalby in his signature gardening apron in one of his greenhouses. Below: a display of narcissi at his front gate



Danish gardening guru Claus Dalby tells Ciar Byrne about his hugely popular design philosophy

The Danish word *hygge* means a sense of cosy conviviality and contentment, but how can we apply this to our gardens? One man who can provide the answer is Claus Dalby, sometimes described as Scandinavia's answer to Martha Stewart, who lives in Aarhus on Denmark's Jutland Peninsula.

Dalby, 58, who enjoyed a former career as a conjurer with eight performing poodles, has captured the hearts of half-a-million social media followers. In his TV appearances, YouTube videos and live chats on Facebook and Instagram he shows people how to make colourful container displays and bring a bit of magic to their borders.

He has published more than 30 home-and-garden books through his own publishing company, Klematis, though none have been translated into English until now. *Containers in the Garden*, which will be published in March, is a lushly illustrated guide to planting in pots.

When Dalby and his husband moved into their house in 1994 its 4,000-square-metre garden was just a big lawn. He was inspired to transform the space after meeting the Danish gardener and artist Anne Just at her home in the coastal town of Blokhus.

'I saw some pictures of her garden and, as a publisher, thought maybe she could make a book. So I contacted her and she invited me to come and see it. I was almost in shock because I'd never seen such a space. I recognised how beautiful a garden could be, and the way she was working with "rooms" was completely new for me. I became a gardener in a split second,' recalls Dalby.

Shortly afterwards Dalby and Just visited Britain, where he fell in love with the idea of 'garden rooms'. On his return he enlisted the help of a designer, Jane Schul, to achieve a similar effect in his own space. The result, as can be seen in his videos and posts, is a garden with a strong structural background of beech and yew hedges that provide a framework for abundant and romantic planting. There are also three elegant greenhouses, from where he presents videos and live broadcasts, as well as plenty of *hygge* places to sit.

'We have many seating places. For me, the main thing in the garden is the design – it's the room, it's the furniture.'



I like to make the garden outside reflect how I'm living inside. To make it cosy. To be honest, I don't have so much time to sit, but I do have coffee in the morning with the gardeners. For me it means so much to have some cosy places around.'

Dalby has two gardeners helping him. 'They are amazing. They have ideas but they always ask me what I think. I know every square centimetre of the garden and I always say that when I'm putting plants together it's like when I'm cooking: you have some things in the kitchen and you wonder if they will taste great together. I can't see a flower without thinking about companion plants.'

Nowhere is this more evident than in his container displays. There are more than 2,000 pots in his garden, which are refilled every year with his own-brand Claus Dalby potting compost – it contains slow-release fertiliser to keep the plants well fed.

'My idea is just to plant one single variety in each pot. Often you see people filling big containers with a lot of different plants, but for me I think it's much better just to plant one single variety in each pot. Then you can move them around – you can put something in and take something out.'

In early spring his pot displays are filled with narcissi and tulips. The pale-coloured *Narcissus poeticus* and *Tulipa* 'Spring Green' are two of his favourite varieties, but he also likes to use more vibrant purples, pinks, oranges, maroons and almost-blacks.

He has extensive displays by the front gate of his property, at the entrances into the house and in front of his



Clockwise from top: hydrangeas and single and pompon dahlias are among Dalby's favourite flowers

greenhouses, as well as throughout the garden. 'I like to surprise people,' he says. 'I'm using different colours in different places every year.' His love of bulbs has spread so far that Dutch plant breeders have even named a tulip after him.

His two key pieces of advice for growing tulips are to bring pots under shelter after planting bulbs in the autumn, and to place bulbs in sunny spots when planting directly into the garden, as they hate getting wet. After the tulips have finished flowering he either composts them or gives them away. For anyone wondering what to do with faded pot displays in their own garden, he advises planting the entire potful in a border – that way at least some of the bulbs will flower for a second or third year. ➤

PICTURES: CHRISTINA GREVE; CLAUS DALBY

Glorious gardens



Steps leading down to the Sunken Garden. Right and below: lilies and tulips are among the many bulbs Dalby plants in containers



Chartreuse is one of Dalby's favourite foliage colours in the garden – 'You can use it with all other colours and it always brightens the display up,' he says. He particularly likes plants such as *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Amber Jubilee', *Aralia cordata* 'Sun King' and *Philadelphus coronarius* 'Aureus'.

In the borders, hydrangeas are his big love, including *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle', *H. paniculata* 'Wim's Red', which turns from green to white to red, and *H. paniculata* 'Great Star', which he first encountered at Le Vasterival, the Normandy garden of the late Princess Greta Sturza.

'I really like shrubs in the borders because they add some structure,' says Dalby. 'I think there are so many great hydrangeas. What I like also is that they will flower maybe not in deep shade, but in shade. In my driveway I have "Limelight", and I was so surprised how strong and big they were the first year.'

Against the formal backdrop of his garden Dalby likes to let the plants run a little wild, choosing naturalistic umbellifers such as *Pimpinella major* 'Rosea' and *Valeriana pyrenaica*.

'If you look at my plantings they are very cottage-like because I'm using many umbellifers,' he says. 'I really like the naturalistic and wild look but I have the structure from the hedges.'

Both in containers and in the borders Dalby likes to use tall plants for level changes, such as the statuesque *Angelica*

gigas, which is popular with bees and other insects. 'It's amazing, but the thing is that you need to sow it from fresh seed. It's such a beautiful plant, it's also such an architectural feature.'

While he invites his 500,000 social media followers into his garden virtually on a regular basis, Dalby has taken the decision not to open his garden to the public.

'Friends are always welcome. I really love to show people round, but because I make television programmes and many people know who I am, I think not only people who would like to see the garden would come – maybe they would also like to watch me in the house, so I don't dare to open the garden,' he says. However, gold membership of the Claus Dalby Garden Club does allow people to visit his garden once a year.

He is also put off by the amount of work opening up the garden to groups would entail. 'Maybe people think my garden is always nice and tidy, but it's not. I'm always showing off the nicest places,' he admits.

In place of the eight poodles of his magician days Dalby and his husband now have a single black poodle, Nero, who is his constant gardening companion. 'When he was a puppy he stole all the plant labels,' he says. 'He was also digging, but now he is mad about playing with his ball, and when I'm live-chatting sometimes he is coming with the ball and placing it on the floor because he would like to play. He just loves to be in the garden.'

Dalby's latest venture is an online shop, Claus Dalby Home & Garden, which sells everything from candlesticks, plant pots and bird feeders to gardening aprons, florist's snips and jute string. He ships products all around the world – nearly 60 per cent of his followers on YouTube are in the US.

On Facebook he has nearly 100,000 followers, who he calls his 'ladies' because 99 per cent of them are female. He explains how important social media has become: 'I'm starting here at seven o'clock tonight livestreaming, it is so amazing, because after I have closed the camera the orders will just start to come.'

As it is early days, he is very hands-on. 'My web shop is taking so much time now. I'm taking all the pictures, I'm travelling around Europe to fairs to put the things together. I'm also taking all the emails. It's great fun for me.' ■

♦ *Containers in the Garden* is published by Cool Springs Press, price £22. You can follow Claus on YouTube, Facebook and Instagram @clausdalby or visit his shop at clausdalby.dk