



Gardener's Nursery

A transplanted Englishwoman brings L.A. down to earth

BY WILLIAM BRYANT LOGAN



RUNNING UP A SLOPE OUT OF THE creek bottom in Topanga Canyon near Los Angeles is the Sassafras Nursery. It doesn't look like much from the road, glimpsed through eucalyptus, sycamore, and live oak. Still, gardeners drive from as far away as Pasadena just to visit it. There wasn't a trace of sassafras in the place when the name was chosen for its sound and shape, but the nursery's plant selection is vast and superb: home-propagated yellow delphiniums, whole ranges of gray-foilage plants, boxes of delicate white campanulas spilling out of the shade, masses of native and exotic ferns, citrus trees and ceanothus, and the largest collection of English-bred David Austin roses on the West Coast.

As striking as the choice of plants,

French 'Bonica' shrub roses bloom at the base of Sassafras Nursery's marble pineapple, left. The display of imported roses also includes many English varieties developed by David Austin. Below left: 'Climbing Iceberg'.

however, is their arrangement: clumps of yellow iris and water lilies in a wide pool; a checkerboard of flats containing sun-loving ice plants, strawberries, lavender, pansies, and forget-me-nots; a birdhouse covered in different mosses.

There is a sensitive eye at work here, and it belongs to the owner, Pamela Ingram. She has been possessed by an "undivided passion" for gardening since the days when, as a young woman in London, she tended daffodils indoors during the Blitz. Today she takes pleasure in counseling the customers who have the blackest thumbs. And now that many Californians are preoccupied with drought-tolerant gardening, Ingram and her designer, Eric Solberg, have also become expert at advising on how to get the most plant with the least water.

The nursery has a large landscaping practice, which enables Ingram to help people plan their gardens. (A patio paved with mauve bricks made by Sassafras is the centerpiece of the nursery's display at the Chelsea America Flower Show near L.A. this month.) She likes to imagine the pride a client feels when he can clip a David Austin rose to give to the neighbors. Of course, clients must choose the right rose. Once a red-haired woman with bright blue eyes picked a pink rose that didn't belong with her. Ingram told her so. Later, when the woman was ready to go, Ingram offered to give her the rose. She wouldn't take it. She had selected another.

Form and scent are important at Sassafras, but color is the guiding principle. The owner never thinks of plain pink, for example, but rose pink, coral pink, blue pink—tones to be used in subtle combinations. Someone suggests that blue is her favorite color. "Which blue? Where does it go?" she demands. "Don't say just 'blue!'" (Sassafras Nursery and Landscaping, 275 North Topanga Canyon Blvd., Topanga, CA 90290; 310-455-1933) ▲