



Growing for good

A Cranbrook business is booming and blooming – thanks to the wide selection of houseplants it sells and the story behind their production

WORDS: Anna Lambert PHOTOS: Diana Yule

It might look like your average, pretty, independent lifestyle store, full of thriving house plants, settled carefully into attractive pots and baskets and crying out to be given new homes - but The Glasshouse in Cranbrook is, quite literally, the shopfront for a brilliant social enterprise. It's the brainchild of local business women Kali Hamerton-Stove and Melissa Murdoch.

In 2019, Tennessee-born Kali, who's been living in the area with her husband and children for the past 20 years, was happily running her own lifestyle boutique, plant shop and café in Goudhurst.

Meanwhile entrepreneur Melissa was paying a visit to East Sutton Women's Prison outside Maidstone to hear about plans to help ex-offenders - women reaching the end of their sentence. While she was there, she spotted the prison's two glasshouses lying unused. 'Most prisons used to grow all their own food and some had their own animals too,' says Kali. 'East Sutton Park still grows a fair bit of its own veg, but - due to funding cuts - far less than it did, which is why the glasshouses were empty.'

Melissa then had a great idea - Kali, with her formidable energy and background in marketing, PR and shop-keeping could pivot from running her boutique in Goudhurst and instead, the two women would start a social enterprise involving East Sutton's inmates. It would be based around the glasshouses, with a shop opening in Cranbrook to sell plants produced.

'Melissa asked me three times before I said yes,' laughs Kali 'But she doesn't give up and she's very persuasive. The idea began to grow on me: it was a chance to do something creative and useful - and it was a great idea! Nothing is straightforward when it comes to working with the prison service,

but eventually Melissa and I were able to present our business plan to the Ministry of Justice and it quickly became clear they were very keen to work with us.'

The enterprise launched at the start of 2020, starting with six women from East Sutton. 'Our mission from the beginning was to reduce reoffending through horticultural training and employment, so our team of exoffenders grow and nurture our house plants learn about propagation and plant care, all while working towards a horticultural qualification with the help of the prison's training team.

These days, plants are no longer produced in the prison greenhouses: 'When energy prices went up last year, we realised we couldn't afford to stay in East Sutton,' explains Kali. 'We were incredibly fortunate to find an old building that we could use instead for plant propagation here in Cranbrook. It's not a greenhouse, but it can be used as such and it has a really good, almost meditative, atmosphere - the women love it here.' The team has grown, too: 'Becky is the horticultural expert, while Marie works on resettlement and as the interface between East Sutton and the business, and Katie joined us recently on business development.'

Having the shop as a base means the women also get experience of retail and interacting with customers - great for building confidence and expanding skills.

'We sell the plants face-to-face through the shop - our Prayer Plant is probably our best seller, though it's the Chinese Money Plant that's my personal favourite - but online, too and through corporate gifting.

'With so many people homeworking, companies including Vodafone and Cook have sent our plants to support clients and teams. Given that plants in the workplace or

at home are recognised to boost mood and optimism and to clean the air, they make great gifts, and buying from s means a win-win for everyone.'

Another big part of the enterprise from the start has been plantscaping, which sees The Glasshouse team designing, choosing and maintaining plants for corporate offices and hospitality spaces. 'Our first big client post-Covid back in 2021 was the Conduit Club in London's Covent Garden - our team went in, with a ratio of one ex-offender to one member of support staff -and handled plant layout over six floors. It was a major job for us, and the Club is still a very happy client for us today.'

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Kali says it's incredibly satisfying to see the benefits of the enterprise for those involved. 'Lack of employment and accommodation are two primary reasons women reoffend. We work to help The Glasshouse women have the best chance of a life without reoffending. The UK horticultural industry has been incredibly supportive and will hire women through our programme. One of our team was from the West Country and, on release, was due to be assigned a probation officer back home. She was worried she'd fall back in with her old crowd, which obviously would have been disastrous for her. We helped to find her landscaping work and accommodation in Lewisham before she left prison and,

because it was waiting for her, the prison service agreed to assign her a probation officer in London - a great result. She's now got a new relationship with someone she met through work and is thriving.'

Another recent success story came as a result of the team running one of its wellbeing workshops at a hotel - part of a wider hospitality group - in London.

At reception, one of the women spotted a plant that needed TLC and asked if she could tend it. Having pruned it and given it a new lease of life she explained where she was from and the service The Glasshouse offers. The result? The enterprise is now pitching to plantscape for all the hotels within the group.

With all of the profits reinvested into The Glasshouse, the plan is to expand and grow programmes in prisons and for ex-offenders - already the scheme has more applicants than it has places. 'We've been approached to offer the same service at men's prisons but, for now, we feel the nature of what we offer is better tailored to women's needs,' says Kali.

'In 10 years we'd aim to see The Glasshouse scheme on offer in women's prisons throughout the UK -with a national network of offices meaning we can offer our plants and plantscaping services across the country.'

Given the speed with which the enterprise has flourished and the benefits it offers all round, Kali's plans sound far from being an impossible dream.

Stand back and watch The Glasshouse keep growing...

Shop open at 3a Stone Street,
Cranbrook TN17 3HF, Tuesday to
Saturday, 10am to 4pm
theglasshouse.co.uk