

Nick Macer has established a fine collection of rare plants at his nursery in Gloucestershire.

# A PRECIOUS HAUL OF GEMS

David Wheeler meets a nurseryman whose enviable collection of hard-to-find plants is an inspiration to any gardener

**N**ick Macer seems to be a happy man. Tree-smitten throughout his childhood and teenage years, he now spends his working days among a collection of mostly hard-to-find woody plants that many of us would be pleased merely to glimpse. Not that his botanical and horticultural interests lie exclusively with trees and shrubs, as his nursery, Pan-Global Plants, confirms.

Nick is a true all-rounder with unfamiliar abutilons and birches, new (and newish) magnolias, and a range of deutzias, franklinias and viburnums among his collection; all unheard of at the nation's garden centres. These and many more are lined up alongside potted climbers, perennials, bulbs and succulents; his interest in the latter borne out by an informed review of Greg Starr's new book, *Agaves*, which Nick wrote for a recent issue of *The Plantsman*.

Nick's path to a satisfying and family-supporting career began with a three-year course at Merrist Wood College in Surrey in the early 1990s. From this, he took a one-year 'gap' to work for six months at each of two world-famous institutions: the Sir Harold

Hillier Gardens in Hampshire, and Westonbirt Arboretum in his native Gloucestershire. Eventually, armed with classroom and hands-on skills, it was time to earn a living, and Nick took several paid jobs before deciding to 'go it alone' and start his own nursery.

First, he rented land at Painswick Rococo Garden, near Stroud. There he established himself on the 'rare plant trail', and was quickly identified as a supplier of uncommon plants and a magnet for aficionados on the lookout for trees and shrubs that were difficult, if not impossible, to find in run-of-the-mill retail outlets.

After six years, he transplanted himself and set down what appears to be a taproot within a walled garden at Frampton-on-Severn, not far from the late Sir Peter Scott's Wetland Centre at Slimbridge. With no time to work his third-of-an-acre garden at home, Nick has made one at the nursery - a place to try out personal design ideas, to experiment with plant combinations, and to evaluate an unfamiliar specimen's full potential in open ground. In his 11 years at Frampton, Nick has enviably extended his stock, and to browse his neat rows of plants for sale and

tunnels quite literally stuffed with botanical desirables was, for me, a lesson in horticultural acumen that delightfully exploits personal idiosyncrasy alongside commercial nous.

From that extensive and constantly changing stocklist, I found myself reaching for plants that, while not exclusively available from Pan-Global, are nonetheless difficult to track down elsewhere. Take *Magnolia laevifolia*, for example; one of his almost 50 magnolias. This medium to large evergreen shrub has small leaves with brown undersides when young, and what Nick describes as 'deliciously fruity-scented, creamy-white flowers that open flat in spring from handsome, velvety-brown buds'. Moreover, it is tough, hardy, easy and lime-tolerant - surely deserving of a prime garden position.

Another with year-round foliage is a phlomis that has curiously in-turned, tube-like, grey, felty leaves. Its whorls of mustard yellow flowers in midsummer associate well with many of the ornamental grasses also to be found at Pan-Global. Nick's odd names and descriptions occasionally find their way onto labels: the scent of *Osmanthus yunnanensis* flowers is memorably

given as 'vanilla playdough'. A mahonia that he calls 'Pan's Peculiar' has a 'soft, drooping' habit that gives this normally stiff and spiky genus a measure of unexpected grace. His tall, richly coloured *Corydalis* 'Tory MP' has just the right shade of blue to excite certain electioneers on polling day.

Nick has travelled widely in the pursuit of plants, making small discoveries in such far-flung places as Vietnam, the Azores and California. More for foliage than flowers, he grows a dahlia at Frampton that he found in the hills of northeast Mexico. Unusually, it wants to flower in December, and is hardy enough to last that late in the year. Against a wall, it will make a handsome 2m mound of huge complex leaves on strong multiple stems, rewarding gardeners with a sprinkling of single light-pink flowers in the run up to Christmas. A good substitute, I would say, for another seasonal Mexican: *Euphorbia pulcherrima*, the ubiquitous poinsettia.

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