

PLANT HUNTING IN ENGLISH GARDENS

PAUL PICTON

*Ballards Nursery
Malvern, Worcestershire*

Large nurseries producing batches of plants by the thousands and plush garden centres, where one has to thread a delicate path through concrete and plastic paraphernalia before finding the plants, are as remote from my kind of nursery as is a Texas ranch from a Herefordshire smallholding. I don't feel in the least envious (I suppose some might call it ambitious); in fact, I consider myself lucky to be running the sort of tiny concern which relies upon the production of interesting plants for its survival. Perhaps, we can, quite easily, grow 100 plants of *Anchusa caespitosa* and several hundred *Romneya coulteri*. But it is equally as satisfying to get out annual crop of 10 plants of *Sanguinaria canadensis* 'Plena'.

So many of our plants provide just the odd few cuttings or the occasional crop of seed. It is worthwhile asking the question "Would there by any point in producing such plants in quantity, even if it were possible?" True enough, a certain element of the gardening public will always show tremendous interest in the more unusual type of plant. But if plants like the *Anchusa* and *Sanguinaria* were as widely grown and readily available as say *Mahonia japonica*, how long would their special appeal last? There is nothing like familiarity for building up a healthy contempt for sales figures, especially if one's customers are mostly knowledgeable gardeners, who no longer possess the happy knack of killing plants off fairly rapidly!

It, therefore, follows that a matter of prime importance is the regular introduction of plants which are new to the nursery. How fortunate we are to be living in a country which is a veritable treasure house as far as plants are concerned. Whether it is the broad acres around a stately home, the plant-packed confines of a botanic garden or the seemingly most humble of cottage gardens, the range and long establishment of English gardens offer the plant collector an especially rich and varied hunting ground. How valuable this is to those of us who possess neither the time, knowledge, or resources to travel abroad in search of new plants. All around us are old favourites like the double-flowered sweet rocket, *Hesperis matronalis* 'Alba Plena', long since lost to nurseries, but, given to us some years ago by Mr. Eliot Hodgkin. Then, one can be given the occasional worthwhile newcomer, like *Dionysia aretioides*. Consider the thousands of really good plants which have been intro-

duced to this country, only to sink into near oblivion because no one has propagated and distributed them. The great collectors like Forrest and Wilson sent home so many plants which we hardly ever see today. Yet, a large number of them must still be growing in some gardens. Take, for example, *Corydalis cashmeriana*, which can be seen flourishing in gardens but can hardly be said to be widely grown.

Most gardeners are remarkably generous in giving material from their plants because they fully recognise the sound sense in having a reasonably wide distribution if the plant is to survive. It generally pays to be scrupulous as to one's methods of gathering materials. We remember the gentlemen who called on a great lady gardener to be told that she was engaged for some minutes — "would he care to walk around the garden?" Of course, the temptations presented by each border were far too great for him. Being the pre-polythene era, he tucked the cuttings under his hat, becoming so engrossed in his task that he lost count of time. Consequently, he suddenly bumped into his hostess around the corner and despite his state of confusion remembered his manners and raised his hat in greeting!

Not every plant will prove as valuable as the proud donor would have one believe. I still recall the person who was kind enough to present us with variegated ground elder (*Aegopodium podagraria* 'Variegatum'). Perhaps, garden centres could promote this plant as the ground cover discovery of the century!

Correct naming can be a considerable headache. It is often surprising to find how many people have no idea what they are growing. Perhaps it is less surprising to discover at some later date that you have been given the wrong name. *Aeonium tabulaeforme* is a most decorative plant in foliage and quite spectacular in flower. This had to languish for many years as "some sort of succulent, nearly hardy", before someone came along with the name. Many years ago we were given a young plant from a parent found growing on a rubbish heap in William Robinson's garden at Gravetye. The owner was happily calling it a "Dwarf Laburnum". Subsequent enquiries at Kew revealed it to be *Cytisus sessilifolius*, a plant long cultivated but hardly seen today. Naming is somewhat easier on the odd occasion when one is given a completely new cultivar. We were fortunate to be given cuttings of a dwarf form of *Hebe cupressoides*, now called *H.c.* 'Boughton Dome', which grows to around 40 cms. It makes a lovely shrub for the rock garden or heather bed as do so many in this useful genus.

Having got the initial stock growing we find it best to establish some plants to grow on to maturity, rather than rely en-

tirely upon propagation from the nursery stocks. The wide range of plants handled makes the latter difficult if something is missed at the appropriate time. Alpines and dwarf shrubs are grown in raised beds making cultivation relatively easy and, at the same time, providing excellent display areas. Given a safe number of stock plants (dependent upon the speed of growth and ease of propagation) nursery plants can be sold as and when available instead of waiting to build up large stocks. Unless one has a "sure-fire popular plant", the latter course can be a mistake in a small nursery.

Let me now introduce you to some of the plants which we have collected over the years in English Gardens.

Acanthopanax sieboldianus (*A. pentaphyllum*) 'Variegatus' must be one of the finest small growing, deciduous variegated shrubs. It is perfectly hardy with us and very decorative in form as well as leaf colour. Cuttings root quite readily. Other members of the genus can be propagated from root cuttings but the likelihood of producing green foliage would be too great in this instance.

Arundo donax × 'Variegata' came to us from a botanic garden. It is a striking plant of considerable architectural value in the garden, appreciating a reasonable amount of moisture. Judging by its potential for vigorous growth, it is possibly fortunate that it is not completely hardy in the Midlands. Division is the easiest means of propagation although stems will root from the nodes, under mist.

Cestrum parqui was given to us by that great gardener and collector of good plants, Mrs. Margery Fish. The plant was found in Chile in 1787, yet how often is it seen today? It needs the shelter of a west wall but that is not an insurmountable problem. During late July and August the plant, around 1.5m high, is wreathed in cool yellow blossoms, sweetly scented in the evenings. Half ripe cuttings root easily if the propagator has been able to stand the strange smell of the foliage!

Euphorbia nicaeensis is a plant which grows easily from seed. A specimen growing in a stony, well-drained and sunny spot will usually throw plenty of seedlings around the area. This is a spurge of considerable merit, coming into flower in early summer; the thin stems hold masses of bright lime-green heads into the autumn. Standing about 45 cm high and forming a neat mound, the whole effect is one of grace and colour combined.

Iris unguicularis 'Alba' is a rarely seen form of this justly popular winter-flowering plant. It grows very well in a rather impoverished condition, under the shelter of a sunny wall. Division is the only means of propagation and, since the plant is

not as vigorous as the type, stocks are not likely to be plentiful.

Itea ilicifolia originally came from western China in 1895. Our plant attracts more attention than any other shrub in the nursery during August, when the long tassles of blossoms (reminiscent of *Garrya*) cover the side of a potting shed. It grows very freely on a northwest wall, which is well clothed by the shiny, evergreen foliage through the year. Fairly ripe wood, taken with a heel, will root easily in late summer.

Leptosperum scoparium 'Nichollsii Nanum' must be one of the most attractive dwarf shrubs for a sheltered site in the peat bed or rock garden or for alpine house culture. The form of the plant, bronzed foliage, and bright red flowers, go to make up a plant of high quality, which never fails to attract attention. It does best in an acid soil and, in the Midlands, really requires some shelter in winter. Mature plants grow to about 20 cm × 40 cm. We root cuttings of half-ripe shoots.

Mahonia aquifolium 'Moseri' is one of the most sought after shrubs on the nursery. The striking apricot-coloured leaves in early spring always catch people's eyes. In fact, we often wish that it was a little less conspicuous! Not that propagation presents any particular problems; layers or cuttings are equally easy. Availability of material is the problem. To gain the best effect from mature plants it is advisable to layer or prune them back to encourage bushy growth, as opposed to the natural rather leggy habit. Obviously a plant for flower arrangers!

Meconopsis cambrica 'Flore Pleno' unlike the type plant, is a welcome addition of any garden. The bright orange, or yellow flowers last long in bloom and the plants seed quietly around without becoming too numerous. Most seedlings come true but one can find the odd single blossom. So, a small element of risk is involved in selling plants prior to flowering.

Oenothera macroglottis (*O. australis*) is reminiscent of the better known *O. caespitosa*, with white blossoms that fade to pink "on the morning after the night before". However, the flowers are larger, as is the foliage, which has a greyish tinge. *O. macroglottis* is also more reliably perennial, although some protection might be required in winter. The plant will run for a considerable distance. We have one which has travelled a distance of 2 m in one season. Our plants have not set any seed. We, therefore, propagate by lifting and potting the shoots arising from the underground running stems. The plant grows to about 25 cm high.

Origanum rotundifolium is a comparative newcomer to the range of interesting marjorams, which includes *O. × hybridum*, *O. dictamnus* and *O. amanum*. Only about 15 cm in height, it quickly forms a clump up to 60 cm across. The large, apple-

green bracts are decorative over a long period through the summer. Young shoots root well in spring and large clumps can be divided.

Paeonia mlokosewitschi has been with us since 1907 and still continues to be a much sought after plant. This herbaceous paeony must surely be one of the aristocrats of the English Garden. The red buds and pink and grey candlesticks of shoots, prior to flowering, are sufficient to justify a place in any garden. Then come the gorgeous silky, yellow flowers and, in early autumn, bright yellow and orange shades in the dying leaves. Division of large clumps is possible, even desirable, once in a while but seed remains virtually the only means of propagation commercially — and we all know how long it takes to produce a flowering-sized plant!

Phlox pilosa 'Chatahoochee' (20 cm) is a fairly recent introduction which always excites much comment. It carries such a wealth of intense mauve/blue flowers that we have to cut off the stems as soon as possible so that some shoots will be produced. Watering in dry weather helps the growth of the latter which will root quite easily. The plant grows best in acid soil.

Salvia multicaulis represents the many sages which we seem to have collected. The enormous bright purple/red bracts on this low shrubby plant (about 60 cm in flower) are quite extraordinarily spectacular. Understandably it is a popular plant with flower-arranging ladies, who are always open to buy a fast maturing plant which does not suffer from being cut back frequently. Cuttings taken either before or after flowering are successful. The plant needs a sunny, well-drained site.

Trachelium asperuloides (*Diosphaeraa*) makes a charming mound in a limestone scree bed or a showy plant for a pan in the alpine house. The plant comes from Greece and is hardy, although it might require some protection from winter rain. It is very free-flowering, the pale blue blossoms appear in July and August, at a time when few alpines give colour. Plants can be divided or cuttings may be taken after flowering.

Trillium grandiflorum 'Flore Pleno' is a great treasure which we had been seeking for years. The double white, almost camellia-shaped, flower heads have a most exotic appearance. Our plants are growing successfully in a bark/loam mixture under conditions which must really be too dry. We have not disturbed the plants yet but, when the time comes, division will be the method of increase. The prospect of stocks being plentiful seems more than remote. The one nursery offering plants at the moment charge /6 and it is likely that a high price level will be maintained.

Tropaiolum polyphyllum comes from Chile and Argentina

and was discovered in 1827. Even without the bright yellow/orange flowers, the intensely glaucous foliage sprawling over the ground or tumbling down a rock face or dry wall is worth growing the plant for. It is virtually hardy but we find that the tubers need to be established at a considerable depth, or beneath a rock, for safety. We know of several gardens where it is so well entrenched that it has become a weed and has to be thrown out periodically. All very fortunate for the nurseryman! If stock is in short supply, tubers may be cut into lengths with buds, during dormancy, and potted individually so as to avoid any disturbance once growth has started.

Verbena × *hybrida* 'Sissinghurst'. Here, no guarantees are offered as to the authenticity of the name! What is without any dispute is the fact that this is *the* plant for those who seek a quick turnover. Its vivid pink blossoms, sprawling for 1 m or so across create such excitement that we have to propagate the plant several times through the season. Cuttings root rapidly and make saleable plants bearing flowers with almost indecent speed. And — the key to financial success? The plant is not winter hardy in the Midlands but is so attractive that gardeners are quite prepared to buy plants each year.

Viola 'Irish Molly' is an old friend now in very short supply. Possibly not as vigorous a plant as in former days; one needs a constant supply of young plants to replenish stock. The unique coffee (or is it brandy?) colour makes it certain that every plant available will be sold. We all know that the public's interest in certain groups of plants ebbs and flows. At the moment, interest in named violas appears to be on the increase.

Having seen a tiny selection of the plants collected from English Gardens, I hope that you will have been reminded of the wealth of interesting material which is around us. There are many worthwhile plants growing in a comparatively small number of gardens. There are plants which merit wider distribution and, in some cases, plants which urgently need to be propagated to safeguard their survival.

The problems involved in growing such a wide range of plants on one small nursery must be obvious. But it is a fascinating task, full of surprises, delights and disappointments, laced with a constant flow of new knowledge, which is possibly why many of us are involved in horticulture.