



ROY LANCASTER VISITS...

# Hedgehog Plants and Gardens

Near Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk is a nursery filled with a delightful, if eclectic range of shrubs, trees and herbaceous plants

Author: **Roy Lancaster VMH**, plantsman and writer.  
Photography: **Tim Sandall**

One of the most satisfying summer flowering shrubs I have in my garden is *Calycanthus x raulstonii* 'Hartlage Wine' AGM. Its delicately fragrant (to some noses) magenta-coloured, multi-petalled flowers with an inner circle of smaller, creamy white-tipped tepals appear from late spring through summer on this ultimately large-spreading, multistemmed shrub. Its large leaves turn a pleasing butter, yellow prior to falling in autumn. It is hardy and easy to grow in fertile soil. There is another less-vigorous hybrid named *Calycanthus* 'Venus' whose white flowers, green-tinted in bud, possess a cream and purple centre, as well as *C.* 'Aphrodite', a more recently introduced hybrid with similar flowers to 'Hartlage Wine' in colour but larger and more likely flower again in late summer.

#### Conversion to a plant lover

I was reminded of this plant in early September last year when I found it offered by Hedgehog Plants and Gardens, a small, former garden centre turned >>

nursery at Risby Barns, Risby, close to Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk.

The nursery site, approximately 0.3 ha (¾ acre), is leased by Simon and Jay McWilliams, self-confessed plantaholics although Simon admitted that when he met Jay – a long-time plant lover – he was manager on a farm growing millions of onions and, as he put it, ‘I hated plants’. That changed thanks to Jay’s influence and in 2008 they started their own garden services business. Under the above name, two years ago, they established their present business serving mainly East Anglian gardeners on site. They also sell plants at local garden shows and plant fairs.

Simon is a man who calls a spade a spade and he wasn’t embarrassed to refer to his conversion from ‘plant hater’ to ‘plant lover’ in almost evangelical terms. I was eager to see examples of the plants which excited them most, and following *Calycanthus* ‘Aphrodite’ we then spent the morning wandering through sales and stock areas. In common with many smaller specialist nurseries, many new acquisitions are purchased as plugs for growing on and when possible, in-house propagation by cuttings or – in the case of most of their perennials – by division.

## Hedgehog Plants and Gardens

South Street, Risby Barns, Risby, Nr Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk IP28 6QU  
01284 811055; risbybarn.co.uk/hedgehog-plants

Open: 10am–5pm Tues–Sun.

Access: wheelchair accessible.



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### Shady customers

We first viewed the plants being grown in a large shade house, my eye immediately being attracted to a range of epimediums and the striking foliage of an aroid: *Amorphophallus konjac*, a smaller, hardier relative of giant *A. titanum* (titan arum), the prized showpiece of many a botanic garden. I have grown several plants of *A. konjac* from corms. While

they have yet to flower, they do produce a handsome single leaf comprising a darkly mottled fleshy stem up to 60cm (24in) crowned by an elaborately divided blade. On a mature plant this blade can be 1m (39in) across. My largest plant, now three years old, I grow in a large pot which I store in a cool greenhouse when dormant in winter – while dreaming of its first flowering – before the leaf emerges maybe the next season. It is the same with us, Jay said. ‘One day our prince will come’.

Another bold-foliaged perennial for sale was *Peltoboykinia tellimoides*, a member of the saxifrage family from damp, shady places in the mountains of Japan (Honshu) whose pale green, ragged-petalled flowers are produced in loose heads above the leaves in early summer. From Japan also comes *Ajuga incisa* ‘Blue Enigma’, so unlike our native bugle *Ajuga reptans* in its low-spreading clumps of erect stems with bold jagged-toothed foliage and blue flowers in spring.

Outside on the sales benches I was interested to see for the first time *Clematis heracleifolia* ‘Cassandra’ AGM, a plant of sub-shrubby growth with bold handsome foliage and striking blue blooms. Foliage quality comes before flowers in Simon’s judgement. ‘There was one show we attended,’ Simon said, ‘when most flowers on our stand were damaged by a sudden hailstorm prior to judging, so we removed those remaining and retitled our exhibit “Fifty Shades of Green”. It was so well received we have been foliage fans ever since.’ >>



Roy with Simon and Jay McWilliams, owners of Hedgehog Plants and Gardens, in the shade house at the nursery.



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### Pick of the plants

- 1 *Calycanthus* ‘Aphrodite’, a choice shrub with showy summer flowers.
- 2 *Amorphophallus konjac*, a tender perennial with dramatic foliage.
- 3 *Euonymus cornutus* produces showers of colourful fruit in autumn.
- 4 *Tasmania lanceolata*, a handsome evergreen shrub best in mild areas.
- 5 *Clematis heracleifolia* ‘Cassandra’ AGM, a fine late-flowering perennial.
- 6 *Hydrangea paniculata* ‘Le Vasterival’, with its large, starry, sterile flowers.
- 7 *Lespedeza thunbergii* AGM has vibrant pea-like flowers on arching stems.
- 8 *Frangula alnus* ‘Fine Line’ makes a dainty, unusual choice for a hedge.



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### Shrubs of choice

When it comes to woody plants, Simon admits to a special liking for flowering dogwoods (*Cornus*) and viburnums. The couple grow several cultivars and hybrids of *Cornus kousa* which always catch visitors' eyes when flowering in late May or June. Given the number of 'new' selections appearing on the market, he reckons their continued popularity seems assured. Among *Viburnum* on offer I was pleased to see one of my favourites; large shrubby and rarely available *V. erubescens* var. *gracilipes*, a hardier, superior version of the typical Himalayan species. It is notable for its free-flowering habit with fulsome panicles of white, pink-tinted and fragrant flowers in July.

Also here was easy to grow *Lespedeza thunbergii* AGM, a batch of which were in full bloom, their small, purple pea flowers in such numbers that the long, slender stems arched elegantly under their weight. Nearby stood an impressive batch of *Frangula alnus* 'Fine Line', a selection of our native alder buckthorn distinguished by its columnar habit and linear (thread-like) leaves, which turn a rich yellow in autumn. This is capable of reaching 2m (6½ft) or more and can also be used as an unusual hedge or screen.

Equally unusual is *Euonymus cornutus*, a deciduous Chinese spindleberry of loose shrubby habit. I feel it is best trained on a wall to allow its slender stems to form an elegant cascade and display its narrow leaves and curious four- or five-horned crimson fruits with their brilliant orange emerging seeds in autumn. This is hardy in most gardens, while *Tasmannia lanceolata* (previously *Drimys*) and *x Didrangea versicolor* 'Blue Sapphire' are shrubs for milder areas or where winter protection can be provided. *Tasmannia lanceolata* is a handsome evergreen of dense habit often seen in Cornish and Irish gardens and it thrives with me in Hampshire too. Lovely *x Didrangea*, a hybrid between tender *Dichroa* and a hardy *Hydrangea*, is worth a challenge for its handsome heads of blue flowers over a long season. It is also suitable for a conservatory.

Simon pointed out to me a *Hydrangea* popular with his customers: *H. paniculata* 'Le Vasterival' (syn. Great Star) with scattered extra large, star-shaped, four-sepalled sterile flowers. 'It flowers continuously from late July into



Roy was pleased to see a fine plant of *Fothergilla gardenii* 'Blue Mist' (left) with its beautiful glaucous summer foliage.



Part of the sales area (right) at Hedgehog Plants and Gardens.

September,' he said, and is so unlike those many selections with large, crowded and heavy flowerheads'.

### Trees to treasure

Among trees available I noted *Halesia carolina* 'Arnold Pink', a most beautiful selection of Carolina snowbell tree with the normally white flowers shaded delicate pink, a most desirable deciduous tree for the larger garden given its often multistemmed spreading habit. Equally ornamental is Chinese *Catalpa ovata*, worth growing for its handsome foliage and panicles of small white blooms with yellow and red markings in late summer. Bi-generic *x Chitalpa tashkentensis*

Summer Bells ('Minsum') – a hybrid of *Catalpa bignonioides* and *Chilopsis linearis* – is a rarely seen large shrub or small tree with handsome long, narrow leaves and panicles of exotic pale pink, bell-shaped, open-mouthed flowers in summer. Although hardy, it thrives and flowers best in a warm sunny site.

These are just a few of the particularly desirable plants Simon and Jay are now offering customers. Not all are regularly available but, given their own interest in special plants and determination to share them, I left with the feeling that Hedgehog Plants and Gardens will continue their 'mission' for as long as the demand continues. ○