

# Nick Macer

The nurseryman and self-confessed plant geek on his passion for trees and woody plants, his fondness for funky and why forsythia will never light his fire

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Nick Macer has the comfortably rumped, laid back air of a man happy in his work, of a life spent idyllically out of doors. Contented possibly but laid back he profoundly is not. This is a man totally consumed by his passion for plants; an unapologetic, self-proclaimed plant nerd. "I've got no problem with being a nerd, although I'm glad it's plants not matches," he says with the piercing intensity, and infectious enthusiasm of a man truly obsessed.

The seeds of this obsession were sown young, walking with his father in Westonbirt Arboretum, he was entranced. A nonconformist, free-spirited child, he left school early, bright but bored, his passion for doing things immaculately confined to stacking supermarket shelves in perfect symmetry and polishing cars to a high octane gleam. Geekiness lay temporarily dormant while he kicked around doing "the usual teenagerish stuff" until he found himself once again, walking through the trees at Westonbirt, thinking why don't I do more of this? It came, he says, from nowhere, the sudden blinding certainty that here, outside with nature, was where he had to be. Passion reignited. Nick needed to know everything about plants and trees. Armed with his father's copy of Alan Mitchell's *Trees of Britain and Northern Europe* – still on his shelf, dog-eared and held together with yellowing Sellotape – he would drive around voraciously studying trees, saturating himself with one group, moving to the next, only when satisfied he knew everything there was to know. From trees he progressed to woody plants, obsessively accumulating plant knowledge. "I was amazed how much I crammed in in one year. I wallowed in the gorgeoussness of it all," he says.

A three-year course at Merrist Wood, including a gap year spent at Hillier's and Westonbirt, was followed by a stint as head gardener at Cowley Manor where he managed to plant a small arboretum before being made redundant. Then urged on by a friend, he started a retail nursery at Painswick, with £10,000, one polytunnel and a small shed. Plants included a range of unusual grafted *Aesculus* species and some interesting Chinese tree peonies. From the outset Nick honed his eye for special, rare "funky" plants. "My angle has always been the unusual. No point in being interested in forsythias. I did come at it, with complete focus, from a massive plant nerd angle. Did I tell you I am a geek and a nerd?"

When Painswick fell through. Janie Clifford, a regular customer, offered her walled garden at Frampton, previously

home to Gloucester Old Spot pigs. Just off the M5 it was the perfect location. People piled in.

In autumn, when the nursery closes, he sets off plant hunting with Paul Barney from Edulis, to destinations as cutting edge as his plants: Vietnam, Manipur, Azerbaijan, Mexico and Chile. Although with a nursery, website and mail-order business to run, and two small children, he's cut it back to around three weeks a year. He refreshingly admits to having far too high an opinion of himself to follow slavishly in the footsteps of the great planthunters, leaving that to "people who can't think of anything original to do." In Mexican mountains and forests in Manipur he's experienced some of the most sublime moments in his life: "Not just cerebrally stimulating, but plain bloody beautiful; glorious on every level." Each year he returns with nigh on 200 seed lots, which he sends to a friend in Cornwall to propagate. Most of his finds come from the wild. "Genetic variation in plant populations is quite remarkable. There's that incredible diversity you don't get in cultivated plants."

Seventeen years on Pan-Global Plants is, for the discerning gardener jaded by the usual garden centre fare, an inspirational emporium, crammed with idiosyncratic, quirky and special plants that grow well in the British Isles. "Just because it's rare and unknown doesn't mean it's ungrowable," says Nick. From February to October he works from dawn to dusk and every weekend, adding continuously, and obsessively, to a plant base and knowledge of biblical proportions. While trees and woody plants remain an abiding passion, there's also the ten-year obsession with agaves. Currently he's looking at a whole range of ferns. Then there's the Mexican dahlia, which apparently doesn't fit any species known to dahlia experts; magnolias, "sumptuous things", and the lesser known hydrangeas, *H. serrata* and *H. heteromalla*. His favourite? Whatever and wherever his obsession leads him to next.

For Nick would always rather be doing plants than anything else. "I'm entirely moulded by my plant nurture," he says. □

## USEFUL INFORMATION

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## NEXT MONTH

Designer Andy Sturgeon.

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