

Nick inspects his monster *Agave americana*, which he has nurtured for 20 years.

# Worldly wise

Nursery owner Nick Macer is besotted with plants – and the more unusual and quirky the better. Tom Gard discovers a unique corner of the world in a Gloucestershire walled garden. Photographs Clive Nichols

EVEN ON A CRISP AND COLD Gloucestershire winter afternoon, at least a part of nurseryman Nick Macer's mind is still in Mexico.

Nick, owner of Pan-Global Plants, has just returned from a second plant hunting adventure to this most botanically diverse and still often wild country. He had been inspired by a similar trip the year before, where, among many highlights, he had stumbled across a vast swathe of the recently classified agave, *A. montana*, 3,000m up in the mountains of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

It is, Nick enthuses, “the most awesomely beautiful agave you could ever hope to find”, and the fact that this year he will quite possibly be the first nurserymen in this country to offer it for sale says a great deal about the ethos behind Pan-Global Plants. Nick was inspired by the specimen not just on account of its compact and numerous leaves – armed with red-brown teeth that give the appearance of a giant *Sempervivum* – but also because it grows in one of the colder regions of Mexico and experiences relatively high rainfall. All these factors point to its potential in this country's gardens.

Nick has a passion for rarities and what he calls ‘funky plants’, basically meaning anything that can get gardeners who are bored of garden centre fare genuinely excited. You don't need a hothouse to grow anything that comes out of the three shade tunnels and poly tunnels that feed Pan Global's catalogue. These are not rarities for rarities sake. They are selected as they will grow well in at least parts, if not all, of the

British Isles. The point is to push the boundaries, to invite us to take on a challenge.

“People assume that because something is rare or unknown that it is tender or ungrowable,” Nick says. “That is often simply because they know nothing about them; large commercial operations ignore these kind of plants because they aren't always easily mass produced. It's easy to forget that so much of the stuff we now consider as standard was considered rare and strange 100 years ago.”

The mountains of Mexico it is not, but in more homely terms the location of Pan-Global Plants nursery and its show garden is about as spectacular as they come, certainly in this country. For the last three years Nick has been trading from the walled kitchen garden of Frampton Court, a privately owned, Grade I listed, 18th-century manor house with park and gardens on the fringes of the Cotswolds, near Stroud.

The nursery is overlooked by the estate's Orangery, which has to be one of as the prettiest garden building in Britain, and behind the

walls is Frampton-on-Severn's village green, a vast green corridor reputed to be the biggest in the country. His landlady, Janie Clifford, is also one of his oldest customers, and suggested Nick took up residence there after he lost his previous premises at rather short notice.

Nick started off studying arboriculture at Merrist Wood college in Surrey, but found himself more attracted to botanical and horticultural matters than commercial forestry. Spells at



*Acacia baileyana* 'Purpurea', a pretty form of wattle.



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Westonbirt and Hilliers arboretums followed, but by the time he was made redundant from country hotel Cowley Manor, near Cheltenham, Nick, ever the independent spirit, was already planning to start up his own nursery.

As is so often the case, the walled garden at Frampton had been left to its own devices for too long and had become something of a weed haven. The overgrown wilderness, however, was nothing that a small borrowed herd of Gloucestershire Old Spot pigs couldn’t deal with over the course of a winter. The garden is still developing, but there is already enough within it to have the serious visitor make a bee-line towards the tunnels in case limited numbers lead to disappointment.

The centrepiece of the garden is a huge *Agave americana*, which Nick inherited in a pot over two decades ago. It is now 1.5m tall, with a spread of a good 2m and had to be brought in by heavy loader. The species is quite hardy, but it is still surrounded by a large wooden frame in winter to support the fleece needed to protect it from occasional hard frosts. Around it, Nick has created a large raised bed of pure ballast to show what can grow in a soil-less environment. There are *Fascicularia*, more agaves (*A. difformis* is particularly attractive because of its curly, wavy leaves) and the lovely *Puya castellanosi*, with silvery-green foliage.

Against the right angle of the hottest south-facing wall there are two heavyweight dahlias on show. *D. australis* is about 1m high, with lilac blooms, and the giant *D. imperialis*, the tree dahlia, is over 3m tall and grown as much for its foliage as for its lavender flowers.

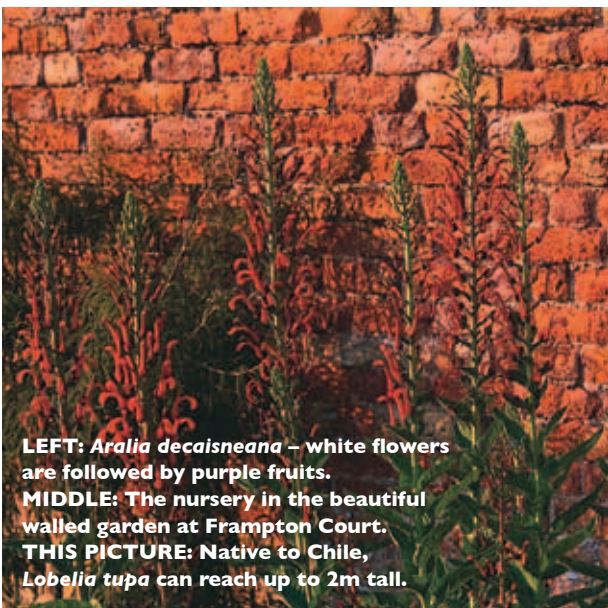
It would be, however, wrong to give the impression that Pan-Global is only about exotica. Regardless of origins or geography, any plant that Nick considers outstanding, be it rare or simply undervalued, can fit into his ‘funky’ category.

In years to come it will be a surprise if the diminutive but perfectly hardy mock orange *Philadelphus maculatus* ‘Mexican Jewel’, with typical white but tiny flowers scented like bubblegum, doesn’t become a common favourite. But there are other candidates on show, too – there’s a new, Devon-raised, dwarf *Eucryphia lucida* called ‘Dumpling’ and bamboos feature heavily, including a really fine new violet-blue caned species *Fargesia scabrada*.

The garden walls also play an important role in Nick’s choice of plants. The heat they retain is helping the innovative gardener to prove that, with the aid of large quantities of mulch, the bamboo *Phyllostachys edulis*, which is a monster in its natural environment and southern Europe, can achieve great heights over here too.



**THIS PICTURE:** *Neolitsea sericea* produces small yellow flowers in late summer.  
**MIDDLE:** *Agave difformis*, with its distinctive wavy leaves.  
**RIGHT:** The common coral tree or *Erythrina crista-galli*.



**LEFT:** *Aralia decaisneana* – white flowers are followed by purple fruits.  
**MIDDLE:** The nursery in the beautiful walled garden at Frampton Court.  
**THIS PICTURE:** Native to Chile, *Lobelia tupa* can reach up to 2m tall.



**PROFILE OF A PLANT HUNTER**

Nick Macer left school at 16 not knowing what he wanted to do in life. The turning point came when, still in his teens, he joined a landscaping business as an understudy, unlocking a hitherto unknown passion for plants. He borrowed Alan Mitchell’s *Trees of Britain and Northern Europe* from his father and it soon became his bible.

He decided to go back into education and study for an arboriculture degree at Merrist Wood college in Guildford. However, his interest was more in botany than forestry and he arranged placements at both Hillier’s in Hampshire and Westonbirt, Gloucestershire.

He spent the next few years planting the beginnings of the arboretum at Cowley Manor, near Cheltenham, but still wasn’t fulfilled. On the urging of his friend and fellow plantsman, Mark Fillan, he struck out on his own nine years ago and set up Pan-Global Plants, moving the operation to Frampton three years ago. From small beginnings, Nick’s nursery is now one of the leading specialists in what he calls “inspiring and idiosyncratic plants”.



**LEFT:** Fruits of *Ficus carica* ‘White Marseilles’ ripen in the warmth of the walled garden.  
**THIS PICTURE:** *Deutzia setchuenensis* var. *corymbiflora*’s star-like flowers bloom in clusters in July and August.  
**RIGHT:** *Dierama pulcherrimum* ‘Blackbird’, commonly known as angel’s fishing rod.







**LEFT:** The distinctive garnet centres of the *Hibiscus sinosyracus* 'Lilac Queen'.  
**THIS PICTURE:** *Senna alexandrina* is a shrub rarely grown in the UK.  
**RIGHT:** *Fascicularia bicolor* subsp. *canaliculata* – a hardy bromeliad, unaffected by frost.



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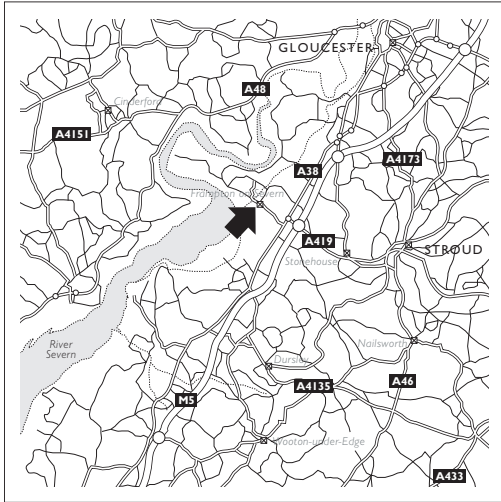
Nick's love of trees has never diminished and the nursery boasts many eye-catching subjects. *Polylepis australis*, a tree-cum-bush from northern Argentina, flowered for the first time this year, but it is its flaky pale-brown bark and the seemingly random selection of leaves turning yellow in the autumn that makes it so fascinating. The numerous magnolias on offer are anything but standard, nor is the wide range of hydrangeas. Both are long-term passions.

Pan-Global Plants is at the vanguard of a generation of nurseries trying to get away from the standardisation of plants. To make this work a level of savviness is a prerequisite, and Pan-Global's excellent, informative website, allied to a detailed and often humorous catalogue, complete with cartoons by quirky local artist Zebedee Helm, enable Nick to reach a widening audience.

However, Nick's overriding 'raison d'être' is the plants, and the fact that he can make a living from them, in such a glorious setting, is a bonus and a daily cause for celebration. ■

### Further information

- Pan-Global Plants, The Walled Garden, Frampton Court, Frampton-on-Severn, Gloucestershire GL2 7EX. Tel 01452 741641, [www.panglobalplants.com](http://www.panglobalplants.com)
- Open Feb-Oct, 11-5, Wed-Sun, inc Bank Holidays. Nov-Jan by appointment. Phone in advance. Closed second Sunday in Sept. For details on Frampton Court itself go to [www.framptoncourtestate.co.uk](http://www.framptoncourtestate.co.uk)



### NICK'S FAVOURITE PLANTS

Nurseryman Nick Macer picks a selection of his favourite plants, all with a distinctive exotic edge, yet suitable for growing in the UK.



### EXOTICS

- *Agave montana* – hardy with numerous compact leaves with red teeth (see above)
- *Aloe polyphylla* – dense rosette producing perfect spiralling leaves and orange red flowers

### BAMBOO

- *Fargesia scabrada* – new to cultivation in the West. Clump forming, 2-3m high with persistent orange culm sheaths contrasting with violet-blue canes
- *Thamnocalamus crassinodus* 'Lang Tang' – tiny, arrow-like foliage held off blue-grey culms. Clumping to 3.5m, likes semi-shade

### TREES

- *Acer micranthum* – a rare, unfussy Japanese maple. Tinted leaves turn red and orange in autumn
- *Styrax formosanus* var. *formosanus* – rare species from Taiwan with highly scented, bell-like flowers

### SHRUBS

- *Euphorbia x pasteurii* 'John Phillips' – new robust clone. Big, broad foliage, honey-scented flowers
- *Hydrangea serrata* 'Miyama-yae-murasaki' – new from Japan with striking blue or pink lacecaps
- *Hydrangea aspera* – new collection from Gong Shan in China. Red backs to large foliage, pale lilac lacecaps
- *Hydrangea aspera* Kawakamii Group – from the mountains of Taiwan. Large, flat, lacecap heads of deep violet flowers with white florets, in autumn.



**THIS PICTURE:** The pea-like flowers of the tender *Amicia zygomeris* appear in autumn.  
**MIDDLE:** The bright green, drooping needles of *Pinus patula*, native to Mexico.  
**RIGHT:** Originally from China, *Indigofera pendula* flowers for five months of the year.



**LEFT:** *Stipagigantea* sways above a mass of South African wildflowers.  
**MIDDLE:** The autumn-flowering *Lespedeza thunbergii*.  
**THIS PICTURE:** The fruits of *Arbutus unedo* 'Rubra', or the strawberry tree.