

Size matters

Architectural Plants in West Sussex is no ordinary nursery. Stupendous specimens of some of the world's most dramatic plants are on display. Charles Quest-Ritson visits

Photographs by Mimi Connolly

ARCHITECTURAL PLANTS near Pulborough in West Sussex is not merely a nursery. It is a horticultural wonderland, populated by plants of amazing size, and the first point of reference for designers, garden owners and organisations in search of full-grown perfection. Here, you'll find thousands of trees and shrubs trained to whatever size or shape is needed, with experts on hand who can help you hone your selection.

‘Every tree has an individual shape and character’

Angus White, who launched the company in 1989, defined architectural plants as ‘plants that have their own “architecture”, with strong, sometimes spectacular, shapes that bring a distinctive year-round presence to a garden’. Later on, he added that the best plants combined ‘strong, eye-catching outlines, delicious textures and combined shades of green rule’ and cited eucalyptus, bamboos, hardy palms, hardy bananas and evergreen magnolias as good examples. He soon developed a market for large specimen plants for immediate impact, including tree ferns, cordylines and arbutus—all very popular still today. He also laid out a display area luxuriantly furnished with olives, agaves and Italian cypresses that was a pleasure to visit in its own right. ‘Nobody ever created anything of interest by being timid,’ he declared. →

Liquidambar styraciflua ‘Slender Silhouette’ rise above yew topiary on the right







Above left: A tree-fern frond unfurls. Above right: The leaves of the Ethiopian banana, *Ensete ventricosum*, grow to 9ft. Facing page: Cypress with a topiary 'blobbery' of *Baccharis patagonica* and a homegrown *niwaki*-pruned *Phillyrea latifolia* on the Mediterranean bank



Pruning a *Myrtus apiculata* 'Niwaki'



The fruits of *Trochodendron aralioides*

Business boomed and Mr White began to look for a new place in which to expand his operations. The current site, acquired in 2014, is perfectly located, next door to Sussex's principal Horticultural College at Brinsbury on the main A29 road. It now runs to 32 acres of display houses, 11 greenhouse poly-tunnels and numerous plant collections.

Some years later, Mr White retired and transferred the nursery to Guy Watts, the present owner, who has greatly expanded the list of plants Architectural Plants sells and the manner in which they are grown. The beauty and ingenuity of what the nursery offers are truly remarkable. There is also a series of show gardens in various styles and a long curving walk planted with more mature trees so that visitors can learn how plants continue to develop for several years after planting.

The range of trees and shrubs that give structure to a garden is constantly expanding: 'prehistoric' *Trochodendron aralioides* from Japan is a recent addition, as are several species and forms of *Pseudopanax*, such as *P. lessonii* 'Tuatara' and *Ilex perado* 'Platyphylla', the large-leaved (but not too prickly) holly from the Canary Isles. What do these have in common? All have a solid, evergreen, shapely, exotic, verdant structure—in short, these are archetypal architectural plants.

An important skill for tree nurseries is the shaping of plants to create artistic or sculptural pleasure. This has been practised for hundreds of years by Chinese and Japanese gardeners, but, as every plant is different, it requires great understanding and concentration. Mr Watts practises the Japanese tradition of *niwaki*, which includes pruning, training and shaping trees. It is fascinating to watch these virtuosos picking out the stems to encourage and the many others to cut out.

The experts work their art on a wide spectrum of plants, from popular black pine *Pinus thunbergii* and Japanese holly *Ilex crenata*, to the Chilean *Podocarpus salignus*, one of the most dense of all evergreen trees. The results are fascinating—every tree has an individual shape and character. They also work with English natives, such as yew and box, although these are usually topiarised in the European way into cubes, spheres, spirals and the rounded shapes Mr Watts calls 'blobs'.

‘An important skill is shaping, which requires great understanding and concentration’

Each species creates a different effect, so visitors are encouraged to plan their garden around a grouping of several specimen trees that relate well to each other and then to fill in the spaces between them with a selection of rounded 'blobs' to make a 'blobbery'. Used this way, shrubs, including yew, box, shrubby loniceras and *Viburnum tinus*, create an instant structure, with spaces in between to allow for future development. Softer herbaceous plantings—grasses such as stipa are favourites—can then fill the gaps as the whole matrix comes together.

Some species show exceptional versatility when trained and pruned by Mr Watts and his skilled staff. *Phillyrea latifolia* is one of his specialities, a little-known Mediterranean relative of olives with dark, glossy evergreen leaves. He uses it brilliantly, both as tightly clipped shapes and as a stately specimen plant clipped in the *niwaki* style. →





Right: Shades of Tuscany: the Lake Garden with tall cypresses and multi-stem pines. Above: Large tree ferns, *Dicksonia antarctica*, grow tall in one of 11 giant polytunnels

Euonymus japonicus 'Bravo' is another shrub with bright, glossy leaves that can be clipped into blobs or topiarised. If you remove its lower branches to reveal its trunk, you create an elegant, crown-raised shape that makes it appear far more mature than it is.

Architectural Plants preaches a 'fusion' gospel, looking for combinations of plants that work well together. If, for example, a customer is planning a traditional Tuscan scheme, their first thought may be to plant an ancient ready-made olive-tree and partner it with Italian cypresses. This is a combination that can be made to work very successfully with only a few trees, provided they are well chosen. But then, say the experts, why not break the rules and add something full of vertical drama, such as banana plants? Mr Watts explains the principles: 'Why limit yourself to traditional schemes when you can create an exciting complementary selection of shapes, shades and textures that can bring additional character and interest to your garden?'

Young plants such as yew trees were traditionally sourced as 'liners' in Germany or The Netherlands for training in England. Now, as much as possible is grown at Architectural Plants itself. The trialling continues—Mr Watts is keen to develop new plants and fresh ways of growing and shaping them. *Taxus x media* 'Hicksii', a hybrid between a Japanese species and our own English yew,

is a favourite, partly because it can be propagated from cuttings, but more particularly because it grows steadily and looks good if the lower branches are trimmed of leaves. *Lonicera nitida* 'Elegans', a golden form of the popular hedging plant, can also be pruned the same way, to give an instant impression of age on a shrub that is very quick growing, as well as being completely hardy and not at all fussy about the soil in which it grows.

The nursery also produces living screens. Evergreens, such as the Mediterranean oak *Quercus ilex*, are trained to form a thick screen of leaves on a trunk that can be trained up to the required height. The popular holly *Ilex* 'Nellie R. Stevens' is useful here, but perhaps even better is *Eleagnus x submacrophylla* [syn. *ebbingei*], which is fast growing and makes a very dense super-hedge indeed—an impenetrable evergreen screen right down to ground level.

One final word of warning. Don't turn up at Architectural Plants without some understanding of your needs. Make an appointment and ask for Mr Watts and his staff to attend to you. Big decisions are involved and both sides need to know what the expectations are and what can be done to satisfy them. You will doubtless come away with more and better ideas than those with which you started. ↪

Architectural Plants, North Heath, Pulborough, West Sussex (01798 879213; www.architecturalplants.com)

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