

BLEDDYN AND SUE WYNN-JONES

INTERVIEW BY RAE SPENCER-JONES • portrait by Charles Hopkinson

Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones are in negotiation. After 13 years, their nursery Crûg Farm Plants, near Caernarfon in north Wales, is bursting at the seams and Bleddyn is eager to expand. "I keep trying to create more space and buy new polytunnels but Sue won't let me," says Bleddyn, laughing.

The nursery, which covers almost 20 acres, specialises in unusual herbaceous perennials, climbers and shrubs. However, Bleddyn and Sue are no ordinary nursery owners. Hundreds of the plants on offer are propagated from seed collected in remote corners of the Far East and Central America. They are the only plant collectors in England and Wales, other than the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to hold an on-going collecting licence and after 13 trips, on which they have made at least 13,000 collections, they have a formidable reputation among their peers.

Before the nursery, the Wynn-Joneses were involved in beef farming. "In the early eighties, it became apparent there was little future in cattle for us," says Bleddyn. "I've always been interested in growing things so I decided to diversify. I started growing crops such as *Topaolum tuberosum* 'Ken Aslett' – a tuberous vegetable from South America that bears wonderful, nasturtium-type flowers from mid-summer until the frosts – and sold the tubers to nurseries."

At the same time, Bleddyn was becoming dissatisfied with their garden. "I blame the transition from growing vegetables to ornamentals on Sue," he smiles. "She planted a red-hot poker and I didn't like it so I decided to fill the garden with

shrubs, which I grew from cuttings." The more he grew, the more inquisitive he became and soon found himself visiting nearby Treborth Botanic Gardens and the gardens at Plas Newydd where he had permission to take cuttings of anything that took his fancy. He attended Saturday morning classes to hone his propagation and plant identification skills and in 1991 Crûg Farm Plants opened.

Bleddyn and Sue have known each other for most of their lives. "We grew up together as children and were great friends as teenagers," recalls Sue. In her late teens she left north Wales to go travelling. After spending several years living in London, Geneva and the US, she was reacquainted with Bleddyn at a dinner party. In 2003, the couple celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary, testament to the steadfast partnership that is fundamental to their success. In the nursery there is a natural division of labour. Bleddyn oversees stock control and propagation, while Sue handles quality control and staff. "Sue is much better at dealing with people than I am," says Bleddyn. "We have great staff who we rely on wholeheartedly. We base our whole business on that."

Without their staff, it would be impossible for the couple to pack their bags every October and spend three months in exotic and occasionally hostile locations pursuing Bleddyn's mission in life. "I am obsessed with solving botanical puzzles. I get my teeth into a genus and can't understand why so few are in cultivation," he explains. "On top of that, so many plants are misnamed that I've made it my business to collect species and reintroduce them

into cultivation under the right names." Flick through the *RHS Plant Finder* and Crûg Farm crops up again and again as a supplier of lesser-known species of hydrangea, clematis and thalictrum, among others. Lately, Bleddyn has become consumed by the genus *Sarcococca* (Christmas box) and spent much of the 2003 collecting trip to Vietnam, Taiwan and Sri Lanka chasing species that would solve one of his many taxonomic conundrums.

As with the nursery, the key to their plant collecting success lies in the Wynn-Joneses' unshakeable partnership. "It is very much a joint venture and we trust each other completely," says Sue. "Bleddyn is the one with the knowledge and I never compete with him. If we were both as obsessed as he is, it would never work." Instead she takes charge of the travel arrangements and over the years has devised a wealth of ingenious travelling techniques. "People laughed at me the first time I decided to take an umbrella. It keeps the sun and rain off but best of all you can turn it upside down to catch seed."

Back at Crûg Farm, Bleddyn is planning the nursery's expansion. Every year the number of plants on their list multiplies and Crûg Farm has become a Mecca for discerning gardeners. "We list more than 2,000 lines now," Bleddyn explains, waving an arm at rows of margarine tubs crammed with precious seedlings. "To satisfy demand we really need to double our space." It remains to be seen whether negotiations with Sue will work in his favour. *Crûg Farm Plants, Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1TU. Tel 01248 670232 or visit www.crug-farm.co.uk* ■



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