



# Hunting and gathering

FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, BLEDDYN AND SUE WYNN-JONES HAVE TRAVELLED THE WORLD COLLECTING SEED. TIM LONGVILLE ASKS THEM ABOUT THEIR 2001 SOUTH KOREAN EXPEDITION. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA JONES

Over the last 20 years Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones have turned Crûg Farm near Caernarfon from a beef farm into one of the most respected plant nurseries in the world. At the same time, they've turned themselves into plant hunters so dedicated and successful that they rival any of the heroic names from the past. Every autumn since 1991 they've mounted expeditions to at least one country and sometimes to as many as four. The result has been an accessions list that now runs to an astonishing 12,500 items, while the roll call of places from which they've collected includes Jordan, Taiwan, Japan, Nepal, Sikkim, Sri Lanka, West Bengal, Laos, Vietnam, Guatemala and Korea.

Asked about the motives behind their plant-hunting passion, Sue smilingly emphasises the pleasures that accompany it. "We've always

enjoyed travelling, seeing different landscapes, meeting different people, sampling different cultures – and of course their foods! Plant hunting gives that enjoyment a serious purpose." Bleddyn, though, emphasises the purpose itself. "There are so many plants in danger of extinction. My aim is to get as much of that stuff into cultivation as I can. As far as I'm concerned, even the nursery is a by-product of our real purpose, which I see as the attempt to conserve plants by getting them growing in as many different places as possible. Of course, we have to make a living so I do look for interesting forms of plants that are already in cultivation. But if it comes to a choice between collecting something that is horticulturally interesting and something that is botanically interesting because it hasn't previously been collected or even described, then the botanically



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A TRAIL LEADING INTO A NATIONAL PARK. THE RIPE FRUIT AND EDIBLE FLESH OF *AKEBIA QUINATA*. CH'OLLIP'O ARBORETUM. *ILLICIAM* SEEDS AND SEED HEADS. LEFT: BLEDDYN WYNN-JONES COLLECTING SEEDS.

interesting takes priority, every time – though of course in reality I'd collect both." And, as he points out, it is very easy for plants to be missed. New species continue to be discovered even in countries plant hunters frequently visit. Bleddyn and Sue visited South Korea for the third time in the autumn of 2001 and added around 500 new items to their accessions list.

Over the course of their visits to Korea, Bleddyn and Sue have made many friends. They pay particular tribute to the late Ferris Miller, who died just after their 2001 visit. He was an American who served in the Korean War and never really went home. Instead, he founded an arboretum and self-sufficient community at Ch'öllip'o, on a peninsula below Seoul. It was while looking for Ch'öllip'o Arboretum on their first visit in 1993 that they ran across Dan Hinkley of Heronswood Nursery in America, with whom they've since been on many expeditions. 'Ran across' almost literally: "We were driving down a track and there was this road-weary hobo coming towards us. We stopped to ask the way, bonded on the spot, and next day set off down the road with him. It's just gone on from there."

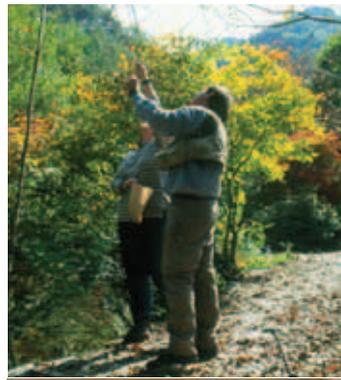
From their point of view, South Korea is a perfect plant-hunting location. It has the ideal combination of a current 'first world' economy, mainly concentrated around the vast city of Seoul, and a still-surviving traditional rural way of life in the thinly populated hinterland. The infrastructure of

roads and small hotels (*yoghuan*s) produced by the country's recent prosperity means that travelling is quick, easy and cheap: a relief after expeditions to some other countries, where plant hunting still takes the traditional form of slow and expensive squads of porters carrying food and bedding along precipitous tracks – with the added hazards of terrorists or drug smugglers.

The great advantage of Korea, says Bleddyn, is that "just about everything from there is bone hardy in the UK, even if it comes from right on the shoreline. That's because their winters are so cold. Indeed, we occasionally have trouble germinating the seed because it needs such low-temperature stratification first". So how many good plants for British gardens have they found? "More than you could write about," he laughs. For example, there's a *Ligularia* species, with big solid leaves and a broad, short, solid-flowering spike, to which he's given the name 'Cheju Charmer'. Why? "Because it's a bloody good plant and if I just put it out as 'sp ex Korea' no one would buy it!" Equally imposing are the huge-leaved herbaceous *Aralia* species, such as *A. cordata*, which grows two metres or more in a season. "That's what I call instant gardening." Another was an aconitum, *A. jaluense*, which they found on the islands off the south coast of Korea. "Masses of it were covering the forest understorey the way bluebells do in British woods," said Bleddyn. "It has the largest flowers we've found on any



LEFT: A KOREAN WOMAN HARVESTING THE MULI RADISH. OPPOSITE: BLEDDYN AND SUE COLLECT SEED THAT IS IN DANGER OF EXTINCTION AND GOOD FOR THE BRITISH GARDEN; ON THEIR LAST TRIP TO SOUTH KOREA, THEY ADDED AROUND 500 NEW ITEMS.





CLOCKWISE, FROM TOP LEFT: A KOREAN FIELD WORKER. PADDY FIELD. *AKEBIA QUINATA* SEED. *LYCORIS RADIATA* NEEDS PLENTY OF HEAT TO FLOWER. MULI HARVEST. *ELSHOLTZIA SPLENDENS*, A KOREAN LABIATE.

aconitum and they're a wonderful deep cobalt blue."

After a long day spent hunting for plants, they spend their evenings cleaning seed and writing up notes on the day's collections. Bleddyn also carries a Palmtop so he can email the necessary details back to both DEFRA and nursery staff. They usually send seed back airmail to the UK before they depart. "We don't need huge quantities of seed so we just pack it up into little wage packets," he says. Once back at the nursery, the seed must go into quarantine for a minimum of 18 weeks. "That means until the following spring, by which time plants have long since germinated and are gasping for natural conditions."

And then, of course, there's the problem of finding out exactly what

the seedlings are. "We make a lot of use of local *Floras* and the knowledge of local experts," says Bleddyn. But there's no English version of the Korean *Flora*, which makes life difficult, so visitors to the nursery with specialist knowledge are always being asked to help establish names. Dan Hinkley has helped with acers, for example, and James Compton with thalictrums and actaeas.

An exchange we had about one discovery on that 2001 trip summed up many of the pleasures and pains of the plant-hunter's life, in which 15 hour days in the field are followed by equally long days either cossetting young plants in the nursery or trying to identify them. One strikingly attractive, metre-tall plant had aromatic foliage, bronzy new growth, and fluffy blue flowers.

My question was simply, "What is it?" "Well," said Bleddyn, "I thought it was *Agastache rugosa*. Then a Korean *Flora* had it as *Rabdosia serra*. But the *RHS Plant Finder* has it as *Isodon serra*." Whatever its formal ID, though, it's always had the same 'nursery' name: 'Korean Zest'. Nothing could be more apt, either for the plant, the place, or the people who found it.

## TRAVEL

# FACT FILE

### BLEDDYN AND SUE WYNN-JONES HIGHLIGHT SOME OF THE PLANTS NOW IN CULTIVATION FROM THEIR 2001 TRIP

These are plants that have only just become available at the nursery or will be available during 2004, as it usually takes between two and three years to produce stock of saleable size in worthwhile quantities.

**1 *Viburnum awabuki*** isn't tough and needs a sheltered site. But it earns it. It is evergreen, with large, glossy leaves, and looks fabulous when it's covered in its red fruit. Eventually, it reaches an imposing five metres in height. We're still engaged in discussions with the *RHS* about its identity, but *V. awabuki* is what it's called – at least for the moment.

**2 *Echinops setifer*** (BSWJ 8416) is a particularly good, tall, blue-flowered species, which we found near the west coast of Korea, in light woodland with sandy, well-drained soil. Given these conditions it should flourish in British gardens.

**3 *Clematis urticifolia*** is a fine herbaceous or sub-shrubby clematis, which grows to a height of about two metres. The species has blue flowers and the advantage of being late-flowering – often into October. It seems to dislike being in pots so be sure to get it in the ground as quickly as possible. However, there's no need for deep

planting since this species is not one that suffers from clematis wilt.

**4 *Sedum viviparum*** is a border sedum that grows up to half-a-metre tall. It has broad cymes of greeny-grey flowers and the stems, perhaps its best feature, are either deep red or purple in colour. It needs sun and good drainage – and is great for self-seeding in gravelly places.

**5** Two fine filipendulas for cool, moist shade are *F. palmata* var. *rufinervis* (pictured), with palmate leaves and broad corymbs of white fluffy flowers, and *F. formosana* with pink flowers.

**6 *Acer takesimensense***, which grows only at the highest levels on a single Korean island, is in effect a superior form of *A. pseudosieboldianum*. It is very slow growing, but eventually it will make a large shrub or small tree. Its virtues are its wonderfully lobed leaves and brilliant autumn colour.

**7** One of our new Korean thalictrums is particularly pretty, with pink pom-pom flowers and attractive, large, lobed leaflets. It grows up to 1.5 metres tall. We thought it was *Thalictrum actaeifolium* var. *brevistylum* but we've given some plants to botanist James Compton to assess and he thinks it may in fact be a completely new species.

### CONTACT DETAILS FOR CRUG FARM PLANTS

In 2004 Crùg Farm Plants is open from February 28 to September 26, Thursday to Sunday and on bank holidays, 10-6. For a plant list send an sae and three second-class stamps to Crùg Farm Plants, Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1TU. For a descriptive catalogue including photographs of many of the plants, visit the nursery's website at [www.crug-farm.co.uk](http://www.crug-farm.co.uk). For enquiries, telephone 01248 670232 or email [bleddyn@sue@crug-farm.co.uk](mailto:bleddyn@sue@crug-farm.co.uk)

Crùg Farm Plants doesn't offer mail order: "We're growing so many plants, we just don't have the time," explains Bleddyn. Their prices don't adequately represent what has gone into producing the plants, but many of them have never been trialled in gardens before, so buying and growing them is to an extent a gamble. "We'd rather charge relatively low prices and sell the plants untried so that customers can share in the fun of the experiment of growing them, and they get grown in as many different places as possible, which maximises their chances of success and survival."

