

Have you ever thought, while wandering through a garden centre, where all the plants came from? In the same way as every pampered lapdog has a hint of wolf in its bloodstream, so every plant you buy has a wild relation. Out there, among rock-strewn hillsides, plunging valleys and swollen rivers, lurk countless untamed species growing free and untroubled by man.

In Victorian times, sturdy sons of Empire ventured into the furthest corners of the Earth and, at great risk, brought back trees and plants for our gardens. Today, the only individuals with permission from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) to collect new plants from the wild are Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones. Over the past 15 years they have brought back thousands of samples and have introduced hundreds of new varieties into our hearts and gardens.

For three months every year they stride through jungles, climb trees, and endure wind and rain to find new and exciting plants for their nursery near Bangor: Crùg Farm Plants. Their story is compelling: until 1990 they were beef farmers with a side interest in gardening. Bleddyn grew unusual vegetables and salads long before Tesco even thought of selling rocket to the urban chic. The turning point was an innocent Red Hot Poker that Sue planted in the garden, "Bleddyn didn't like it, so decided to fill the garden with shrubs grown from cuttings." This led to expeditions to botanic gardens and a course in propagation before BSE struck and the profit and pleasure was sucked from farming. In 1991 the nursery opened for business.

Their first plant-hunting trip was in 1992 to Taiwan; not only their first visit but the first by a British plant hunter for more than a century. Since then they have spent three months every autumn scuttling around Japan, Korea, India, Vietnam, Nepal, Guatemala and Colombia, collecting seed and cuttings. On their travels they have been robbed by bandits in Central America, confronted by poppy growers in Thailand, endured earthquake and landslide and had close encounters with rats, snakes ▶

Gardening Wild things

James Alexander-Sinclair meets two intrepid plant hunters who roam jungles, brave bandits and scale cliffs in search of exotic new varieties for British gardens

Finders keepers: Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones on a mountainside in Vietnam with a species of Mahonia





Vietnamese odyssey: left, Bleddyn climbs a Schefflera 'lenticellata'. Above, investigating *Disporum*. Below, a prize haul of Christmas Box (*Sarcococca*)



◀ and numerous biting insects. Yet in spite of the hazards they are driven not only by the pleasure of travel and the tingle of discovery but also the passionate belief that as many of these rare plants as possible should be brought into cultivation. Bleddyn says, "Natural habitats everywhere are rapidly disappearing – partly due to the encroachment of man into remote areas but also because of natural disasters like floods, landslides and earthquakes."

He has the instincts of a truffle hound and can find the right plants on a tangled hillside. Sometimes they look for a particular plant – in 2003 he scoured Vietnam looking for *Sarcococcas*. "I am obsessed with solving botanical puzzles: why are so few of a particular genus in cultivation, and in particular, why

are so many species misnamed?"

Theirs is a perfectly balanced partnership: Bleddyn is all drive and scientific zeal, while Sue has the artistic eye – it is Sue who will recognise whether the plant is "garden-worthy", as she puts it. "I do potting and people, Bleddyn does plants."

Although many of their expeditions involve long hikes and hair-raising episodes, some of their most successful collecting has occurred beside roads and trails. As Bleddyn explains, "There are some places where you can only collect along pathways, as if you left the trail you would soon get stuck in the

SAMPLES ENTER QUARANTINE IN CASE BUGS OR DISEASES HAVE HITCHED A LIFT BACK WITH THE PLANTS

undergrowth." The story is not over once the trees have been climbed, cliffs scaled and seed collected. Every surface in their hotel rooms is covered with specimens, seed packets and reference books. It is vital that every sample is correctly labelled with a name, a location and an altitude.

Sue is in charge of the laborious job of picking seeds from rotting fruit and spiny seedpods – "not my favourite part of the job". The samples are then posted back to Wales where they enter a 16-week quarantine during which time they are regularly inspected by Defra in case any bugs or diseases have hitched a lift back with the plants. "Our worst disaster was a collection of *Sarcococca* that only grew on one side of a particular hill in Taiwan – unfortunately they came with their own scale insect, so the whole lot ▶

Clockwise from right, Bleddyn and Sue preparing to send plants by mail order; inspecting *Aristolochia manshuriensis* through a lens; snipping Christmas Box



Some exotic ideas for your garden

TETRAPANAX POPYRIFER
'Empress'



An awesome plant with leaves that can reach a metre across and which can easily put on two metres of growth in a season. The

undersides of the leaves are covered with a cocoa-coloured dust called indumentum, which is an irritant.

MAIANTHEMUM FLEXUOSUM

Collected in Guatemala. About 80cm high with delicate flowers that dangle like earrings. Best in shade.

CARDIANDRA FORMOSANA



A member of the Hydrangea family but a herbaceous perennial instead of shrub. Wonderful rich purply-pink lace cap flowers. Collected in Taiwan.

TRICYRTIS FORMOSANA
'Blushing Toad'

A delicate toad lily from the central mountains of Taiwan. Most of the specimens available in this country are hybrids. This is special – a true and rare species with ice-cream pink flowers spattered with red spots.

SCHEFFLERA TAIWANIANA



Collected in 1994, this staggeringly beautiful shrub grows to about three metres. Slightly drooping, many-fingered leaves. Schefflera

is best known in this country as a house plant – this one is tough as old plant-hunter's boots

OPHIPOGON FORMOSANUS

Elegant and swaying grassy leaves with little white flowers in summer followed by blue fruits. Makes a very effective border edging in Bleddyn and Sue's own garden.

◀ had to be swiftly burnt. In the main we are looking for plants that will be hardy and happy in our climate, so most specimens are from higher up the mountains and capable of withstanding many degrees of frost – so are the pests and we need to take particular care."

There is a danger that all these new varieties with difficult botanical names and complicated family histories could scare off the average gardener. That would be a great pity: there are staggeringly beautiful plants in the catalogue that are sold by knowledgeable but totally unimposing staff. There are plants with whose first names we are all familiar but which are surprisingly different. There are affable anemones and aconites, seductive sedums and skimmias, gregarious geraniums and cordial clematis you have yet to meet. Up to now, getting hold of these plants involved a visit to

North Wales, but recently the couple have taken their first steps into mail order, with plants being sent out on overnight delivery in their own specially designed boxes.

The hunting is unlikely to end as there is always another goal, another hillside, another adventure.

"When you think that there is one Japanese island, Yakushima, has a larger plant diversity than this country in spite of being the size of Anglesey, then I don't think we are going to run out of possibilities," says Bleddyn. "I will keep going until I can no longer winch my Zimmer frame up the mountains – and even then I can tell Sue where to look!" ■

Crug Farm Nursery is open until September 29. For further details, contact Crug Farm Plants, Griffith's Crossing, Caernarfon, Gwynedd LL55 1TU. Tel 01248 670232, crug-farm.co.uk