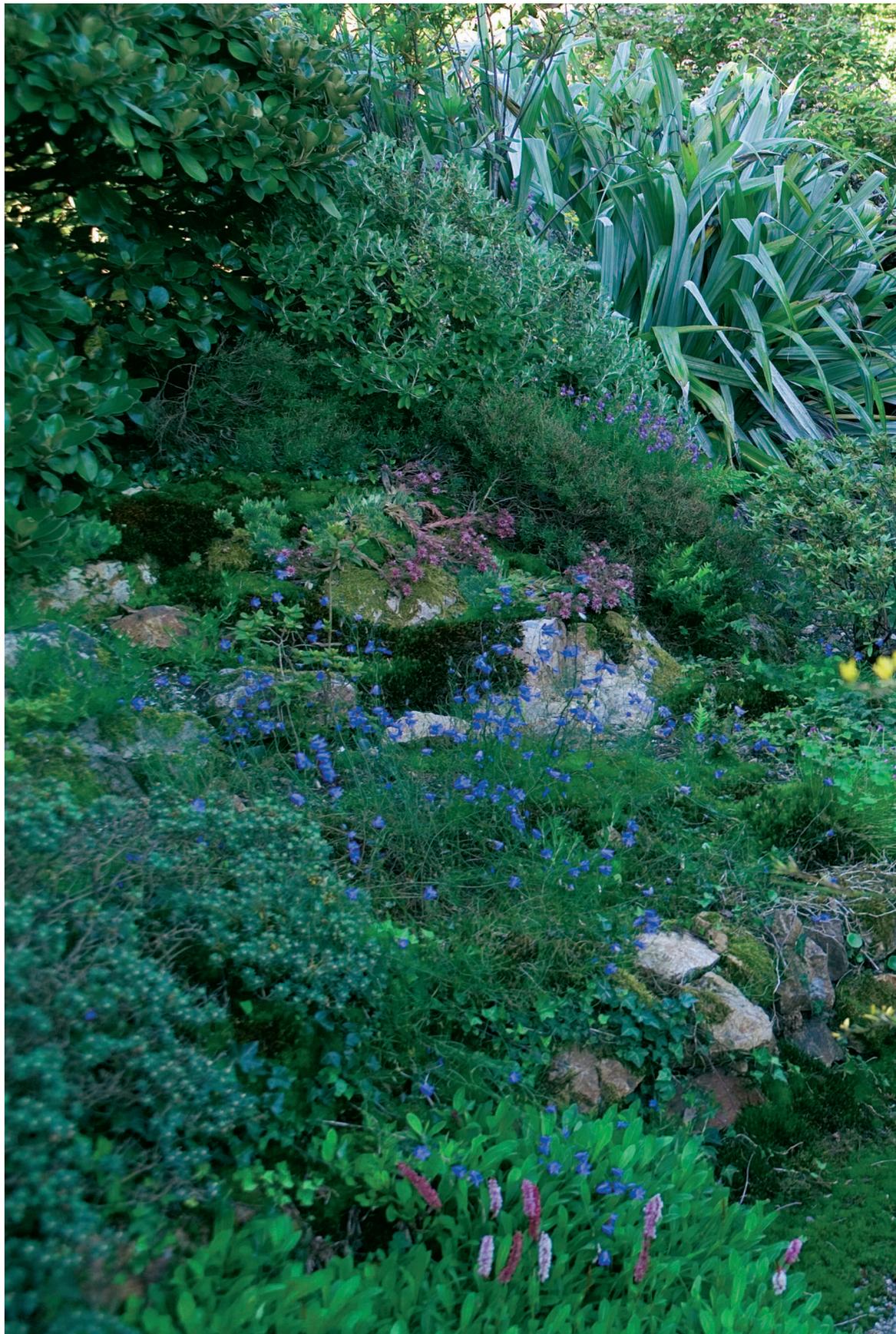




Above *Curculigo crassifolia*, 'a palm-like grass that never forms a trunk'. **Below** Bleddyn and Sue-Wynn-Jones at Crûg Farm. **Right** a rock mound offers gritty beds for plants that demand good drainage, the path curving beneath an outcrop of silver, sword-leaved astelia



When I caught up with Bleddyn Wynn-Jones he was preparing to embark on a seven-week plant-hunting trip to remotest Vietnam. His wife Sue normally accompanies him, but their nursery, Crûg Farm Plants in north Wales, had just started doing mail order, and since she wants to offer 'a Fortnum & Mason' service to customers, she was staying at home for a few more weeks before flying out herself. She was still lumbered with the packing, though. 'Magnifying glasses, cool box, plant press, waterproofs... oh, and a nailbrush – you can't buy them in Vietnam.' She was also having to teach Bleddyn how to use

a mobile phone – a technology he normally leaves to her – but he was not concentrating very hard.

'Our exact destination I am keeping secret, to save it from the more unscrupulous sort of plant collector,' he said, showing me photos of the Phan Si Pan mountain range. 'This will be our third trip there. I found these valleys in 2003 – after a bumpy eight-hour ride in a Jeep – shrouded in low, wet cloud. The forests were degraded from felling and grazing, but there was a phenomenal wild flora – all sorts of Ice Age varieties of species that are normally too tender for gardens. But they were growing in a cold climate, at high altitude, so would be

hardy for us. Yet they had never been introduced.'

He took me outside into his own garden to see some of the spoils from his two previous trips. In the moist climate of the north Wales coast, sandwiched between Snowdonia and the tidal waters of the Menai Strait, conditions are near perfect for Asian woodland plants. The walled garden was like a rainforest understorey of evergreen shrubs, giant foliage, and tapestries of unfamiliar herbaceous plants giving flashes of luscious flowers and berries. Here, I was shown the tall palm-like growths of *Schefflera petelotii*, whose leaves can be a metre across. Elsewhere, Bleddyn took me to



a gordonia, bearing white autumn saucers 'like a camellia on steroids'; a curculigo, 'a palm-like grass that never forms a trunk'; a ginger lily (*Hedychium*); and a scented lily, *Lilium polineae*, with recurved yellow trumpets flushed maroon up their throat. Tucked away, he also has an epiphytic lily with flared crimson funnels wholly new to science. He said these delights are just a fragment of what his Vietnamese mountain holds. 'No plant people have been up many of these valleys, so there are sure to be many more plants still to be discovered.'

His journey would begin with a flight to Hanoi. 'A couple of days there to acclimatise,' he said. 'It's

TOUR OF DUTY

Every year, Bleddyn and Sue Wynn-Jones embark on a quest to bring rare and undiscovered plants back to north Wales. This year their mission was to Vietnam. By **Stephen Lacey**. Photographs by **Andrea Jones**

a beautiful city, safe to visit, with lovely food, and it has the institutes where we get our collecting permits. It's all very straight, no bribes, good people to deal with. I meet my guide, Uoc, and then we will take the sleeper train towards the Chinese border. The hotel where we base ourselves, in Sa Pa, has got a lot more comfortable over the years. There are still rats, of course, but at least the next-door slaughterhouse has moved.'

They then go with their camping gear by Jeep to the trail head, and afterwards on foot, usually living out in the bush for a week or two at a time. 'There is very little in flower in autumn, but we choose this season because plants have got seed on. Most of the collecting is from seed, but we do have permits to take cuttings and dig things up.'

Sue usually remains at the hotel to deal with the collections, which are brought to her off the mountain by runners. 'I never feel lonely, even though I am by myself for days and days, enveloped in thick cloud,' she said. Her main job is to clean the seed from its fleshy casing and dry it. 'This can be quite difficult because of the humidity. So, I have to light a fire in the room and rig up bird netting to suspend the seed, with newspaper underneath. I have got it down to a fine art.'

The seed is sent back in batches to the seven staff at Crûg Farm, accompanied by notes and instructions from Bleddyn. 'Some things, like members of the buttercup and hydrangea family, need sowing straight away,' he said. 'Pretty much everything is sown in vermiculite, and then put outside in a cold frame for the required sequence of winter chill followed by spring warmth to break dormancy and activate growth. After germination, they go into a polytunnel, are pricked out into a coir compost, and then finally transferred into a mix of composted bark. The whole process from seed to plants that are ready for distribution or sale might be anything from one year with some herbaceous plants to 10 years with the slower-growing woody plants.'

The Wynn-Joneses began their nursery in 1991. 'We were farmers, but it was a desperate time for farming, and since I was already keen on plants as a hobby, I decided to try out some more esoteric

'NO PLANT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN UP MANY OF THESE VALLEYS, SO THERE ARE SURE TO BE MANY MORE PLANTS STILL TO BE DISCOVERED'

commercial cash crops,' Bleddyn explained. 'We went for Tropaeolum [the climbing scarlet and orange perennial flame flowers] and then hardy geraniums.' The following year, they went on their first plant-hunting trip, to Jordan. 'It wasn't the best destination,' Bleddyn said. 'I think Bleddyn thought it was a woodland area,' Sue joked. 'After that, we did more research, and starting building up contacts. We have always loved travelling – this is travelling with a purpose.'

Taiwan, where they went in 1992, proved to be a treasure trove. 'From reading the floras, it looked fascinating, but no one seemed to be going out plant-collecting there,' Bleddyn said. 'Of course, we were real novices, but we landed on our feet when a friend introduced us to a Taiwanese student here, whose husband turned out to work for the national parks in Taiwan. He introduced us to everybody. It's like everything. It all seems daunting at first, but once you get stuck in, things fall into place.'

Of the 15,000 collections he has made, Bleddyn still rates his Taiwanese plants among the very best. Two of them have become darlings of the garden-makeover designers for the instant impact of their

Right in their Vietnam hotel room the Wynn-Joneses dry sample specimens of the plants collected on their camping sorties into the mountain forest.

Middle a ginger lily *Hedychium aff yunnanense*, in seed in Vietnam and ripe for collecting; the autumn-flowering *Polyspora axiollis* Vietnamese gordona is being propagated at Crûg for the first time; its young growths covered with suede hairs and its leaves 1m across, *Schefflera petelotii* is one of the most exciting hardy Crûg introductions of recent years.

Bottom the nursery at Crûg Farm



exotic foliage, and out in the Crûg garden, there are supreme specimens. *Schefflera taiwaniana* has made a 15ft evergreen tree, with an elegant, umbrella-like dome of finely poised leaflets, while *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex', a root-hardy form of the rice-paper plant, is like a monster castor-oil shrub, with huge palmate leaves and stems covered in suede hairs. Two other gems he is proud of are an autumn-flowering Christmas box, *Sarcococca wallichii*, with honey-scented flowers from a compact evergreen bush, and *Cardiandra formosana*, which resembles a lacecap hydrangea but with quite spectacular late displays of blue-flowered, pink-bracted inflorescence on both acid and alkaline soils.

Bleddyn, 59, and Sue, in her mid-fifties, have been abroad every year out of the past 15, clocking up trips also to Korea, Nepal, the Philippines and South America, often accompanied by other plantsmen. For parts of this trip they will be joined by the Toronto magnolia expert Peter Wharton and the American nurseryman Dan Hinkley.

'It is very expensive what we do, which is why not many other people do it,' Sue said. 'As our bank manager says, it's more of a lifestyle choice.'

But their contribution to horticulture, and the pleasure it has brought to all their customers (who 'range from the coalman to the Queen' – there are many Crûg plants in the Buckingham Palace garden), has been immense.

While I was writing this, Sue forwarded a message from Bleddyn in his magical valley. He had found the road in the process of being widened. 'Absolute devastation... lots of prized plants being bulldozed. Let Stephen know that *Lilium poilineae* is practically lost... they are tearing all the cliffs down so about 80 per cent of all the known population of that wonderful *Hedychium* is gone.'

It was a sad start to his trip, but it also pointed up the important conservation aspect to the Wynn-Joneses' work. In an age of international red tape and big, muscle-flexing government institutions, the passion of individual explorers and plant-hunters is still vital in helping to discover and distribute the world's rare and vulnerable plants, and save them from extinction. By growing these plants in our gardens, we help in a small way, too.

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