

► **GARDENING:** Exotic gardener Will Giles begins a new series of occasional articles on our local nurseries with a visit to a

Will GILES



Down leafy Ringland Lane in deepest Old Costessey near Norwich, is a secret gem of a nursery and an absolute must for lovers of the weird and unusual. It is not your typical style of garden centre. In fact, it's not a garden centre at all but rather a working plant nursery in the traditional sense, with no frills, just plants.

Urban Jungle is the name of this exquisite nursery, here, you can easily while away a few hours while you gorp in wonder at some of the enormous specimens.

The owners Liz and Malcolm Browne started Urban Jungle in November 2002. I asked Liz the directions for the nursery from Norwich, and she jokingly said "it is on the road to nowhere!" In fact, it is on the right-hand side of Ringland Lane on the outskirts of Old Costessey.

The idea for the nursery came after many years of growing exotics in their garden and an inability to find exotic plants locally. Liz describes the nursery as a hobby gone mad! Now it is the largest retailer of exotics in East Anglia bar none.

Here you can purchase the strange and weird from as little as £1 up to a staggering £1,000!

Craig Knight and Kevin Scales are ludicrously knowledgeable and terribly enthusiastic nurserymen working at Urban Jungle. Both boast much horticultural experience and are invariably on hand to give information on cultivation and growing conditions essential for many of the exotics at the nursery.

Urban Jungle covers approximately two acres in all with several large green houses, Polly tunnels and a shade house, for a large collection of ferns. In the largest greenhouse there is a good-sized pond containing many enormous Koi, some up to 15lbs in weight.

'It's a haven for birds... They've been found happily nesting in the palm trees and bamboos'

As it's in a rather obscure location, Urban Jungle has a stall on Gentleman's Walk in Norwich from Thursday to Saturday, to promote the nursery as well as to sell plants.

The daring duo specialise in anything that looks a little bit different from the norm.

Liz says she is trying to get away from the word exotic as it conjures up the idea that their plants are not hardy whereas, in fact, much of their stock is borderline to very hardy indeed, with only the softer summer bedding that needs over-intering with a little heat or just the protection of a garage or garden shed to keep the worst of the winter vagaries at bay.

Liz told me that the nursery is a haven for nesting birds and that they have been found happily nesting in the palm trees and bamboos. She took me into the propagation house where we quietly crept up on a blackbird nesting in a large pot of *Brunnera* 'Jack Frost'. This is a proper little wild life haven!

It is rare these days for plant retailers to have show gardens for visitors to see plants in situ. Urban Jungle certainly does with a new arid garden that flows into a Mediterranean area through to a moist jungle garden.

The sales areas are well-marked and particularly inviting for the intrepid gardener, but beware your pocket might be lighter on your way out!

Among the goodies available are 12 different species of *Arisaema*, including the impressive *Amorphophallus konjac*, more affectionately or, perhaps not, known as Mr Stinky! Liz says its name was derived from the fact that it stank out the greenhouse when it was in full bloom earlier this year. Not trying to put you off though as this is a fabulous aroid.

"It is the easiest to grow," says Liz. Bordering on hardy, this oddity is probably best over



It's a jungle o

wintered somewhere frost-free and dry as a large tuber. The flowering stem comes up first, rising rapidly to about 5ft with a liver-coloured spadix with the over-powering stench of 'rotting fish', as it is pollinated by flies in the wild.

Luckily, the inflorescence is shortlived and over the next month or so the leaf stalk arises. The foliage is the best part. It comes up after flowering with a thick mottled stem and a fan of almost palm-like foliage at the top in softest chlorophyll.

If that all sounds a little too odd for your garden then how about another of my favourite aroids – the Colocasias. Here you will find many varieties and species including *C. esculenta* 'Mammoth with gigantic 2ft leaves and, of course, the ravishingly gorgeous *C. Black Magic* with its velvety purple-black leaves that are so stunning in the border with paler foliage. Many new forms are flown in from the United States as plug plants, which are then grown on in the nursery to specimen status.

Bananas are an absolute essential for the exotic garden and here you will find five species, with new ones always available, such as *Musa velutina* with furry pink fruit. Another

hardy form if well-sited in the garden is *Musa lasiocarpa*, which when in flower has an exquisite ochre-coloured inflorescence redolent of a globe artichoke head but far more attractive.

Cannas are another indispensable plant for a well-stocked exotic garden and at the nursery you will find at least 15 varieties and none with the dreaded Canna virus that is found in so many other garden centres!

A fairly new introduction to the British Isles are the softly-spiky hedgehog-like *Dasyliirions*. Here you will find some really fine specimens of *Dasyliirion serratifolia* and *D. Longissimum*, both very hardy, easily taking lows of -10C. They are excellent landscaping plants with a fine architectural shape and they're drought tolerant as well.

A tree that particularly caught my eye was the 'Coral tree' *Erythrina crista-galli*, an absolutely gob-smacking plant with apple green three-lobed leaves and ridiculously stunning drooping racemes of bright red Lobster-claw flowers up to 80cm long.

Liz explained to me how important it is to carry a large selection of plants which are evergreen and hardy. The ever-popular Olive tree *Olea europaea* fits into this category with

CANNA DO

■ Cannas, with their dramatic, exotic flowers create a great focal point for the sunny border or patio where they're great for patio containers.

■ They are easily grown tender perennials with architectural foliage and bright, brash flowers full of impact – a real touch of the sub-tropical! They have big open flowers above large paddle-type leaves on plants up to 1.5m!

■ Readers can buy one of either Picasso with its bright yellow, red-speckled flowers, the bright red Lucifer or Durban with its distinctive bronze-leaves and orange flowers for £12.95 inc p&p, or save £9 when you buy all three for £29.85. Supplied in 11cm pots within 28 days.

■ Order on the credit card hotline: 0870 950 7914 quoting EDS6004, or by post, with cheques made payable to Eastfields Nursery, to Sunday Canna Offer EDS6004, Rookery Farm, Joys Bank, Holbeach St Johns, Spalding, PE12 8SG.

