



The call of the jungle

Visitors to an unusual Norfolk nursery are still seeking dramatic tropical plants to turn up the heat in their summer gardens, despite the ravages of recent winters

PHOTOGRAPHS MARIANNE MAJERUS WORDS SUE BRADLEY

ABOVE The ginger *Hedychium gardnerianum* stands out in this area of lush exotic planting. The nursery has found this species to be hardy during mild British winters.

OPPOSITE Dark leaves of *Canna* 'Wyoming' combine with the orange flowers of *Canna* 'Striata' at the nursery entrance.

A shopping expedition to the Urban Jungle nursery is more of a safari than a walk down the garden path. Customers have to drive the entire length of the long and thin two-acre site to reach the car park, passing borders and dells planted with richly coloured blooms, curious leaves and intriguing stems - all before they can even begin to explore on foot.

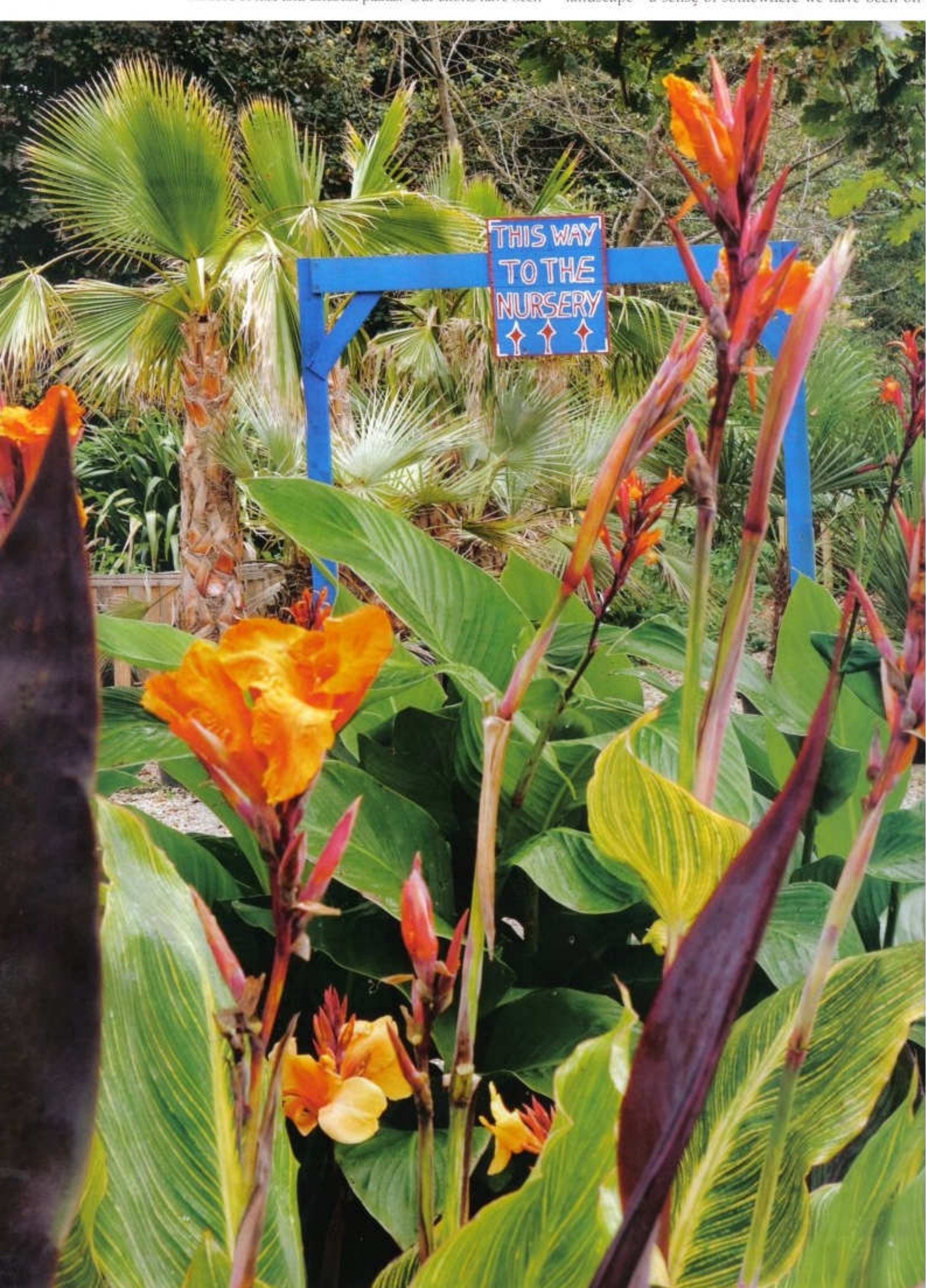
Nestling on the edge of Norwich, Urban Jungle has grown from one gardener's experiments with tropical flowers and palms to a veritable cornucopia for customers looking to add exotic or living architectural touches to their plots. Here, lofty banana plants tower over yuccas, agaves and colocasias; bamboos and palms such as *Trachycarpus fortunei* and *Butia capitata* sway in the breeze, while the jewel-like flowers of canna, ginger and hibiscus glow in the sunlight.

Business partners Elizabeth and Malcolm Browne have spent the past nine years bringing together an intoxicating mixture of rare and unusual plants. 'Our efforts have been

greatly helped by the internet,' says Elizabeth. 'Right from the beginning we had a website, and small growers in places like India and America found it and approached us with plants. We propagate many of our plants, except big specimens such as palms and tree ferns.'

Exotic gardening has been one of the key trends of the first years of the 21st century, encouraged by mild winters and increasing numbers of people captivated by unusual plants from the southern hemisphere, previously thought to be too tender for the British climate. And while the extreme temperatures of the past three winters have been a salient reminder of the unpredictability of our weather patterns and the importance of ensuring adequate protective measures for tropical plants, Elizabeth is confident that the overall style is here to stay.

The essence of exotic gardening isn't about what rare, individual species we grow, fun though this is,' she explains. 'The bigger picture is that exotic gardening is about using plants and other features to evoke an exotic landscape - a sense of somewhere we have been on



BELOW LEFT The distinctive, zebra-striped leaf of *Canna* 'Striata', which is a striking addition to a border even without its showy orange flowers.

BELOW RIGHT South American native *Puya coerulea* adds a touch of silver to the gravel garden.

BOTTOM RIGHT The striking fronds of the tree fern *Dicksonia antarctica* and the golden stems of *Phyllostachys vivax* f. *aureocaulis*.

holiday rather than a traditional English feel. This means that vibrantly coloured but readily available plants such as dahlias and impatiens - particularly when used to create blocks of colour - and every day trees pruned into interesting shapes are as much a part of exotic gardening as the more unusual species in which we specialise.

'Used in a shady position, *Euonymus latifolius* has leaves that seem to absorb good colour, and is one you can prune into a lovely shape,' says Elizabeth enthusiastically. 'Another combination that I particularly like is a border planted with agaves, yuccas, cycads, *Lavandula angustifolia* 'Munstead' and asters.'

The Urban Jungle has planting combinations for all types of situations, including sunny, shady, boggy and dry, and an area known as the Edible Jungle demonstrates how vegetables such as Swiss chard, kale, runner beans and lettuce can be used to create a look that is functional as well as beautiful, while acting as a huge

stock border for cannas and dahlias. Elizabeth's imaginative ideas for exotic plants include using them to enliven even the smallest of garden spaces, as shown by the nursery's 'walls' of rare and unusual species, made up of rows of tiny hammocks of compost.

The extreme weather of the past three winters has struck the nursery with some losses, however, and Elizabeth and Malcolm are now waiting to see what the next few years have in store before they think about restocking tender species such as washingtonia palms. At the same time, they are revising their advice as to the measures necessary for protecting certain tender plants as temperatures drop, such as covering phormiums; or lifting cannas after the first frost has blackened their leaves, placing them in compost that is barely moist and storing them in an environment where the temperature is always above 0°C. Elizabeth keeps a blog on the nursery website, and it's here that you can find out which

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BELOW LEFT Elizabeth Browne uses a sack truck to pull a big *trachycarpus*.

BOTTOM LEFT *Colocasia esculenta* 'Fontanesii'.

BELOW RIGHT *Cordyline australis* and *Cordyline* 'Purple Sensation' are used with *Yucca filamentosa* and *Cercis chinensis* 'Avondale'.

plants have coped with the past winter. It's also interesting to read how this year's very dry spring caused problems. The plants may be more tender, but they still need rain.

'Cannas are quite easy plants to lift,' says Elizabeth, 'but it is vital that they are not lifted to dry out. The advice used to be to leave them in situ and cover them with straw, but for several varieties this hasn't been enough.'

She also advises growers to look out for caterpillars who are very attracted to the giant succulent leaves.

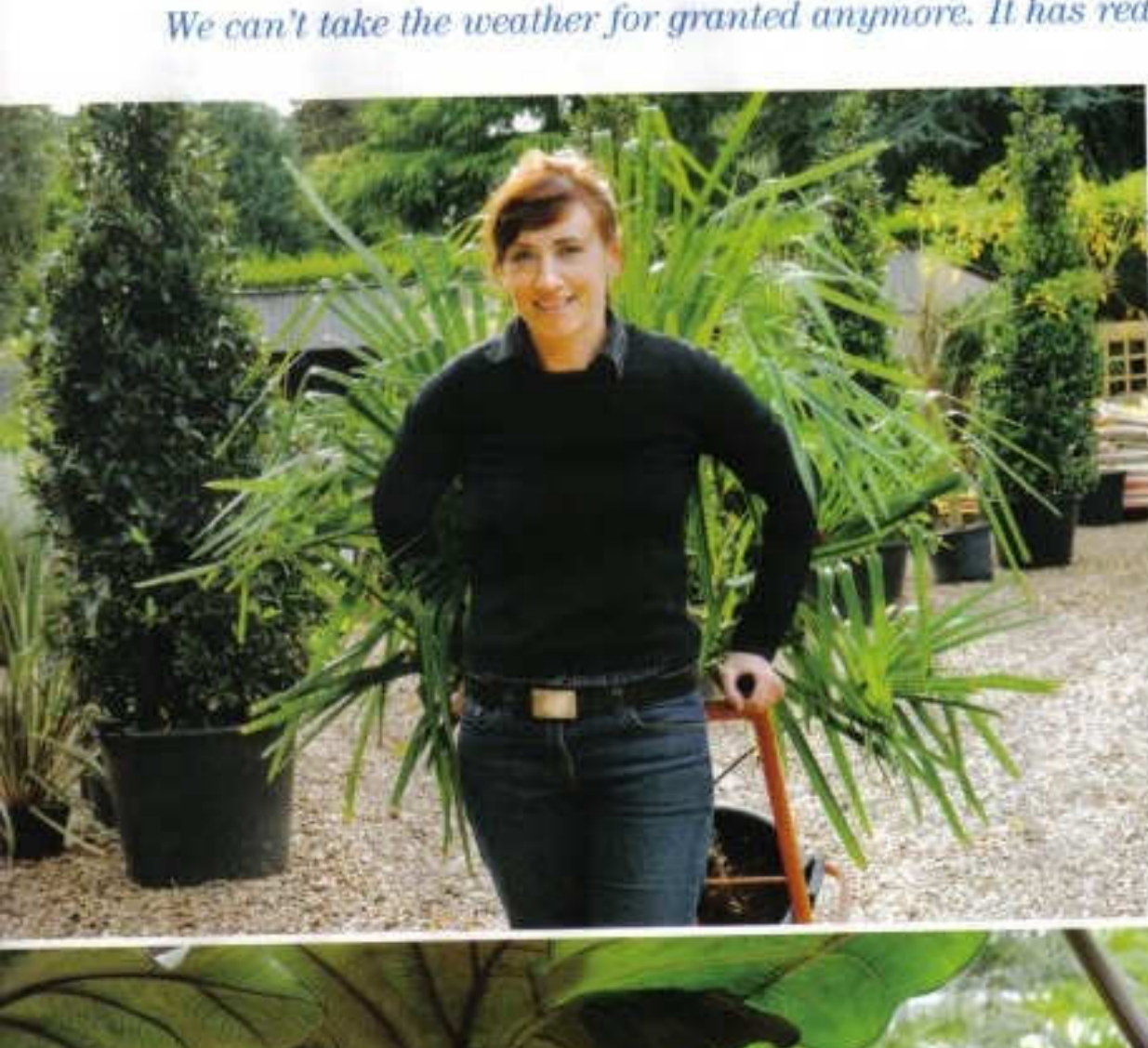
All plants sold by Urban Jungle come with colour-coded labels, so customers can know the hardiness of the plants they buy. They range from red for specimens that won't tolerate any frost at all, to blue, which denotes those that are hardy anywhere in the British Isles, such as bamboo and *Trachycarpus fortunei* - the latter being a popular choice for people seeking to replace weather-ravaged cordylines. This palm is hardy in all parts of the UK, apart from the very far north, and if grown in good

soil it will put on up to a foot in growth every year. 'We can't take the weather for granted any more. It has redefined the way we think of the term 'hardy'. Previously the definition applied to plants that could withstand minus 15°C,' says Elizabeth, 'but we've had temperatures far lower over the past couple of years.'

Despite the challenges of recent winters, she says gardeners across the UK still have an unquenchable thirst for the exotic. The nursery stock includes banana plants, strelitzias, succulents such as aconiums, and a wide selection of acers - so much to tempt gardeners who wish to grow something a little different. 'People are still coming back for more,' Elizabeth says. 'They are picking themselves up after a hard winter, learning from their experiences and getting on with it.'

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