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Gardening Advice

Law of the jungle

Bunny Guinness explains how to get the most from plantsmen's nurseries



Image 1 of 2

The Exotic Garden in Norfolk Photo: Will Giles



By **Bunny Guinness**

1:00PMBST 06 Apr 2011

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If you are interested in exotic plants, nurseries and gardens, you may be surprised to learn that Norfolk is a great starting point. The Old Rectory, The Exotic Garden and The Urban Jungle are three superb examples.

Liz Browne started the two-acre Urban Jungle nursery and garden in Norwich in 2002. She fell in love with exotic plants after encountering *Canna iridiflora*, a huge favourite of mine, too. This led to her renting the land and developing the garden and nursery.

Quite what constitutes an exotic plant flummoxes many — me included — but Liz says she doesn't label plants "exotic", but just practises "exotic gardening". Plants such as epimedium and hostas can look mainstream in a Surrey border or exotic when used as a ground cover under palms, bananas or tree ferns.

Perhaps, Liz says, her least "exotic" plant is the variegated Lily of the Valley. *Convallaria majalis* 'Albostriata' is a bit of a gem, very similar to the normal form, but with pinstripes of cream or yellow running down the leaves.

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Our Climate

With a couple of devastating winters behind us (in which parts of Norfolk reached -17C), maybe some gardeners are reappraising their more striking, borderline hardy plants. Many of us love the drama, texture and chutzpah these snazzy plants provide.

As Liz points out, the frontier plants from about 15 years ago, such as Phoenix canariensis, the Date Palm, Agave Americana and cordylines had until recently become more mainstream. With the promise of climate change we have got bolder and bolder, and now we will have to rejig some of the mainstream choices back to frontier plants.

Liz has been positively surprised at certain plants though. Her loquats, Eriobotrya japonica, Podophyllums and Trachycarpus have breezed through the sharp winters.

A favourite of hers is Podophyllum versipelle 'Spotty Dotty'. This has lobed, umbrella-shaped leaves that are spotted green and brown with purplish flowers. It is clump forming and grows to around 30cm high, creating a dramatic ground covering plant in semi shade.

Of course, we can always wrap the tender plants. Her Cycas revoluta survived the ordeal with wrapping. The problem for many of us was the unexpectedly early snow in November. Many of us more complacent gardeners, me included, had not got around to adding this protection.

The Gardens

Liz's garden comprises various areas: it is a long, thin site and you drive through it to the car park. The more recent and exciting concept is the Edible Jungle, a new idea for me and the name, coined by Liz, sums up a voluptuous bonanza.

The garden was initially all vegetables in 2009, but it devoured so much upkeep that she skilfully added cannas, gingers, bedding plants and other sparky plants to the rainbow chards, black kale, runner beans, gourds and other "jungly" types of vegetables. They are grown in slightly raised, geometrically styled beds and there is a cool pool of water.

It is a partially edible blaze of colour and because all the plants are grown in a hugger mugger style, the labour required is of a more relaxed nature than that needed for purely vegetables. I can see this concept catching on big time.

Liz's Vertical Garden is of great interest to those intrigued by living walls. This technique of smothering perpendicular structures has enormous potential for greening expanses of vertical surfaces and buildings.

On The Urban Jungle's blog you can see photographs of how they constructed their own version; their method looks far more accessible than some systems you may have heard about. Liz has planted hers with hostas, epimediums, evergreen clematis and grasses among others.

The Gravel Garden has been devastated by the cold, with the cordylines and phormiums suffering badly. They may still grow back (Will Giles at The Exotic Garden is cutting the dead leaves away with his phormiums, but thinks it will be a couple of years before they form spectacular clumps again), but now Liz wants to create a Japanese Garden, with lots of cloud pruned pines, phyllerias and other plants trained in Niwaki fashion.

An avenue of tree ferns forms the backbone of another area and by placing them in lines it creates a completely different take to the more conventional use of tree ferns, done to death in those television makeovers. A woodland garden starring pollarded ailanthus, astellias and aralias, and standard pittosporums (tobira) are further interesting elements, along with the greenhouse borders.

There are scores of beauties for sale, too. Deciding which exotic plants you must stuff in the boot and which, sadly, you will have to leave behind



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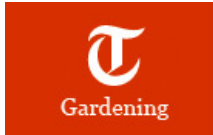
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For more information: [The Old Rectory Garden](#); [The Exotic Garden](#); [The Urban Jungle blog](#)



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04/10/2011 04:01 PM

Great advice Bunny. For those looking to plan and plant their own gardens, author Hilary Thomas has just set-up a new on-line gardening course at MyGardenSchool

For further detail see <http://www.my-garden-school.co...>

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what a wonderful garden.. so inspiring.. thankyou... now if only I can do something like this.....

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