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FEAST FOR THE SENSES

Paul Barney's nursery *Edulis* specialises in unusual edibles and rare plants from his many travels



PREVIOUS PAGE The nursery is based in an old Victorian walled garden in Berkshire
LEFT Paul Barney

RIGHT

1. Magnolia vine, *Schisandra chinensis*
2. *Allium hookeri* 'Zorami'
3. *Aronia melanocarpa* 'Hugin'
4. Carrot fern, *Onychium japonicum*
5. *Cryptotaenia japonica* f. *atropurpurea*
6. *Rubus arcticus*
7. *Pachyphragma macrophyllum*
8. Chilean guava, *Ugni molinae* 'Villarica Strawberry'
9. Szechuan pepper, *Zanthoxylum simulans*



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Paul Barney is “very keen on finding new things”, which might explain why he has always been ahead of the horticultural curve. A veg grower from the age of six, he has variously studied soil science, researched organic farming systems, sold unusual salad leaves to restaurants, planted forest gardens and grown ornamental grasses, long before they became fashionable. After a Masters in Landscape Design at Sheffield University, he set up Edulis Nursery in the early nineties, specialising in unusual edibles. The plants he helped to popularise – including Chilean guavas, Japanese wineberries and Szechuan peppers – could now almost be described as mainstream.

The nursery fitted in perfectly with his love of travel (Barney has plant hunted around the globe) and his belief in permaculture principles, but it took years to become financially viable. “Alan Sugar would have pooh-poohed the idea. It was inspirational, but I couldn’t make it pay,” he explains. In 1994, he survived the sinking of the MS Estonia (“which didn’t help”), after which he took three years off, travelling widely.

Upon his return, he built up his unusual stock and trialed new plant discoveries, while the landscaping and design side of the business (including a large garden for the music producer Trevor Horn) paid the bills.

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“And I was able to trial plants in clients’ gardens to see how they would fare in different soils.”

On the rise

Then came the financial crisis of 2008, which “kicked off the grow-your-own movement – it was quite amazing”. The forest garden that Barney designed for the roof of the Reading International Solidarity Centre (RISC), which is still going strong today, helped to put him on the map. “No one had designed an edible roof garden before.”

Nowadays, he sells his unusual edibles and rare plants at the nursery and rare plant fairs, and sells to garden designers direct or via Crocus and Hortus Loci. “People are looking for something different – a standout accent plant or an additional layer of edibility.” →



“PEOPLE ARE LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT – A STANDOUT ACCENT PLANT OR AN ADDITIONAL LAYER OF EDIBILITY”

The popularity of the Szechuan pepper, *Zanthoxylum simulans*, with its citrusy pink pods and aromatic leaves, shows no sign of abating. “People are intrigued that they can grow an ‘exotic’ pepper in the British climate.” The Japanese pepper, *Zanthoxylum piperitum*, is hot on its heels, however. “The purple-leaved form is especially ornamental,” he says.

Pick of the crop

Another of his favourites, the black chokeberry *Aronia melanocarpa* ‘Hugin’, has good spring blossom and autumn colour, and can be used as an alternative to *Amelanchier lamarckii*. “It’s very tough, with better berries.”

Barney also recommends *Elaeagnus umbellata* ‘Sweet ‘n’ Tart’, an attractive medium-sized shrub with silvery foliage and masses of fragrant flowers in summer, followed by tasty red berries.

For unusual flowers, he suggests *Allium hookeri* ‘Zorami’, named after his daughter. “It’s the only allium that repeat flowers, from June to November, and every part of the plant is edible.” *Pachyphragma macrophyllum*, a member of the cress family, gives a spray of white flowers in March and thrives in poor, dry conditions. Another option is perennial Japanese parsley, *Cryptotaenia japonica* f. *atropurpurea*, which has attractive dark purple leaves, is useful for deep shade and can be used as a garnish.

In terms of climbers, Barney recommends the magnolia vine, *Schisandra chinensis* ‘Bere’, good for part shade. It has masses of white flowers in summer, followed by clusters of red fruits that can be eaten raw or dried. The Arctic raspberry (*Rubus arcticus*) has deep pink flowers followed by pineapple-flavoured fruits, and is an unusual front-of-border or

ground cover plant, which is extremely hardy.

Barney points out that many of his plants can be foraged (or ‘browsed’) at leisure – giving a manageable handful of berries to nibble on or a few leaves as a garnish. This is ideal for time-poor clients who don’t have time to care for traditional crops, but like the idea of growing edibles. And many, such as the Szechuan pepper, are also excellent bee forage plants.

Barney is currently refining what he grows. It’s getting harder to find new edibles, mainly because of the Nagoya Protocol (introduced in 2014 to impose strict regulations on collecting genetic resources globally). Climate change means that he is turning his attention to fruits such as the dwarf pomegranate, which will now ripen in our climate, and to plants for dry shade. He’s also developed a fascination with ferns. “The fiddlehead fern (*Matteuccia*) is eaten around the world, but I’d like to see which others are edible... I guess you could say I’m on a voyage of discovery.” ○

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