



GREAT BRITISH NURSERIES

Beeches Nursery

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**Beeches Nursery, Ashdon,
nr Saffron Walden, Essex CB10 2HB;**
01799 584362; beechesnursery.co.uk

Open Mon–Sat, 8.30am–5pm, year
round; Sun and Bank Hols 9.30am–5pm
(October–March: 8.30am–4.30pm).

Nursery description Established
nursery set on an extensive sloping,
terraced site. A 1.6ha (4 acre) meadow
is also open to visitors.

Nursery stock Diverse, changing range
of garden plants, from bedding to trees,
but particularly herbaceous plants and
shrubs. Much stock propagated on site;
some plants available nowhere else in
the UK. Peat-free compost used for
herbaceous and trees.

Background Begun in mid-1980s by
owner Alan Bidwell, an ex-teacher of
rural science who was inspired to start
a nursery on land behind his mother's
home. Initially growing bedding, the
nursery became popular, expanded and
began selling shrubs and perennials,
gaining an international following. Philip
Seymour, a graduate of Pershore
College in Worcestershire, joined in
2011, and helped refine the nursery's
philosophy, rationalising stock yet
continuing to make available new or
rare plants, while offering the best
garden plants to those starting out.

Facilities Shop with gardening
essentials. Self-service tearoom.
On-street parking. Mail order available. >>



For a keen gardener, nothing is more satisfying than time in a good plant nursery, the sort of place you go to for a specific plant but come home with five or six others – often things you’ve never heard of, have no specific home for but simply must try. When I moved to East Anglia almost 20 years ago, I soon turned to *RHS Plant Finder* to see if any such nurseries might be on my new doorstep. Among several within striking distance, one name was familiar, if only by reputation: Beeches Nursery, a place I return to time and again.

Cobras and pixies

Beeches Nursery owner Alan Bidwell started his business about 35 years ago and has met the challenges faced by many independent nurseries, be it competition from the ‘sheds’ and garden centre chains, the rise in Plant Breeders’ Rights, problems of online sales or the basic issue of attracting trained staff and paying decent wages while making a profit. Alan introduced me to Philip Seymour, a skilled horticulturist and propagator who showed some of the nursery’s best plants.

A new shade house is home to the nursery’s fine range of woodland perennials including hardy *Impatiens*, an ever-widening number of which are seen in UK gardens. Most are easy, long and late flowering, and good for extending displays. Many are native to temperate parts of Asia and do well in fertile, well-drained, moist soil with shelter. Those at Beeches include *Impatiens stenantha*, with bright yellow, slipper-shaped flowers, each with a long curled spur; *I. insignis* which has striped stems bearing clusters of pinkish flowers; and *I. uniflora*

with lilac blooms that might double as a pixie’s hat. All make bushy plants to 90cm (3ft). Frosts turn them to mush, but the roots are hardy to -10°C (14°F).

Beeches stocks several *Arisaema* (cobra lilies), including one I grew for years in a pot: remarkable *A. costatum*. The solitary hooded arum-lily flower each corm produces is burgundy-red, striped white. The tip of the flower’s hood features a thread-like appendage that reaches to the ground, possibly serving as a climbing rope for potential pollinators. A huge trilobed leaf to 90cm (3ft) across expands as summer progresses. It likes well-drained, humus-rich soil; it is hardy to at least -5°C (23°F), if well mulched. My tip is to mark corms with canes – it is all too easy to damage them when digging around.

We also admired the coppery fronds of *Doodia media*, a seldom-seen fern from New Zealand which needs a moist spot. Tougher is *Polystichum setiferum* (*Divisilobum* Group) ‘Herrenhausen’, a lacy-leaved selection of our native soft shield fern. ‘I think it’s the best plant of all for dry shade,’ says Philip. ‘I’ve seen clumps 1m (39in) across – it’s a great thing’.

Geranium can be a good indication of a nursery’s worth, and Beeches has plenty. Many selections of *G. phaeum* were still in flower. I liked ‘Hexham Halo’ with moody purple flowers, each with a pale central ring. More exciting still is ‘Joseph Green’. ‘This,’ says Philip, ‘is probably the first double-flowered *Geranium phaeum* and everyone wants it at the moment.’ It is certainly different, its dark purple, rosette-like flowers enlivened by contrasting, sparkly-looking anthers.

There was so much on offer to tempt the susceptible, of which I am always one; hardy >>



Beeches Nursery is run by a close-knit team (above). Shrubs and climbers are for sale on the lower terrace (right). The glasshouses hold bedding and more tender plants.





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Life at Beeches Nursery

- 1 Philip Seymour and Alan Bidwell set about potting on some plants of *Campanula* 'Pink Octopus'
- 2 *Geranium phaeum* 'Joseph Green', said to be the first double-flowered selection of this species.
- 3 *Fatsia polycarpa* Green Fingers
- 4 *Mahonia bealei* 'Cornish Silver'
- 5 *Arisaema costatum*
- 6 *Bletilla striata* 'Albostriata'
- 7 *Impatiens uniflora*
- 8 *Fuchsia* 'Walz Jubelteen' AGM
- 9 Beeches Nursery owner Alan Bidwell
- 10 *Philadelphus* 'Casa Azul'
- 11 Philip keeping the bedding plants in top-notch condition
- 12 *Griselinia littoralis* 'Bantry Bay'



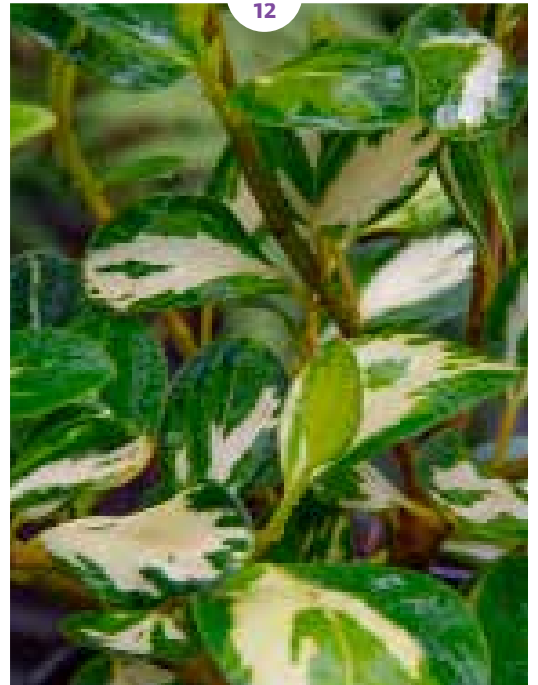
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‘There was so much on offer to tempt the susceptible, of which I am always one...’



orchids such as *Bletilla striata* ‘Albostriata’, many *Astrantia*, *Crocasmia* and *Watsonia*, often with unfamiliar names, and *Jaborosa integrifolia*, a weird nightshade from South America. It spreads by runners that produce oval leaves 10cm (4in) high, nothing much, until one evening you notice a creamy star-shaped flower 6cm (2in) across giving off sweet perfume to attract moth pollinators.

Shrubs to covet

Shrubs and climbers fill the lower terrace of this Essex nursery. My eyes fell on a few favourites: *Griselinia littoralis* ‘Bantry Bay’, an upright evergreen with waxy leaves, each with a large central pale yellow heart, flashed with pale green and edged in dark jade. Philip led me to the *Philadelphus*. After savouring the bubblegum scent of *P. maculatus* ‘Mexican Jewel’, with its mauve-centered, starry flowers on scandent stems, I noticed *P. ‘Casa Azul’*. This is similar but with white, cup-shaped flowers, larger than those of ‘Mexican Jewel’, each stained red in the centre and deliciously scented. Relatively untried, its size and hardiness are as yet unknown.

I passed the *Mahonia* section and saw *M. bealei* ‘Cornish Silver’, so named for the silver undersides of its bold, broad leaflets, similar to *M. gracilipes*, another stocked by Beeches. ‘It’s new; initially we



didn’t think much, but as plants grew away they developed the great silver colour,’ says Philip.

Beeches sell several *Schefflera*, including one of the finest, *S. taiwaniana* AGM. In a sheltered position this forms a small architectural evergreen to around (4.5m) 15ft with palmate foliage. Then there was what I took to be another schefflera, but was in fact new *Fatsia polycarpa* Green Fingers – distinct in having more elongated digits to its lobed leaves than *F. polycarpa*. Philip then showed off another aralia, an unidentified *Eleutherococcus*. Slender but tall, the plant hails from Manipur in northeastern India. It is flushed purple, palmate leaves held on lightly barbed stems. In summer, white flowers then black fruit appear. Philip says it seems to be hardy.

In a glasshouse filled with bedding (a reminder of the nursery’s origins) I was most taken with *Fuchsia ‘Walz Jubelteen’* AGM with upward-facing pink flowers. Plants had been allowed to form upright bushes and standards; they looked quite different from usual fuchsias yet rather appealing.

As Alan joined us, I expressed my delight at the nursery. He explained how he sees offering this diversity of plants as key. ‘Common plants are the base of the nursery; I need regular customers. But I cater for all – from beginners to those seeking rare, specialist plants.’ And, says Alan with a glint in his eye, ‘that is the great joy of horticulture.’ Long may that joy last. ○

The plant I took home...

Lovely *Weigela middendorffiana* is a wonderful thing – if sadly seldom seen – with dainty, pale yellow, bell-shaped flowers in early summer. It is more delicate than many other *Weigela*; it likes a cool, moist place with some sun, and shelter from late frosts. I’ve lost this plant once before, so I’m glad to have a second go. Height: 1.5m (5ft) but usually rather less.

