

Larger than life

Hertfordshire now boasts the biggest tree nursery in the UK. Lucy Land unearths the expertise behind those containerised plants

Photography: Nicola Browne



AFTER three years of toil and labour, a once-derelict site in Flamstead, near St Albans, has been transformed into a stunning nursery boasting the widest range and largest sizes of containerised trees in the country.

Offering 12 stunning viewing acres and holding more than 4000 semi-mature and mature trees, the nursery includes silver birches (from £85), large mature limes and chestnut (£500) and the huge multi-stemmed *Quercus ilex* (£6,000) – the largest tree available in the UK.

Director, Steve McCurdy, studied horticulture in England before moving to California in 1979 where he set up an interior landscape company. He has served on the national board of the American Landscape Contractors Association (ALCA) and chaired the largest interior landscape convention in the US for five years.

He returned to England in 2000 with his American wife, Janet, where he set up Majestic Trees, which now employs a staff of 16 experienced horticulturalists and experts.

'Just one mature tree, artistically placed, can totally transform a property, yet planting big trees can be a daunting prospect for most homeowners,' says Steve. It is not surprising that even the keenest designers and gardeners are wary. A specimen planted too deeply will suffer stem rot while a poorly staked tree will experience wind rock, which will break off the fragile new roots the tree is trying to send out, quickly killing it.

Steve and his team provide planting with a full establishment guarantee. 'Our aim was to build a modern customer-friendly facility where people could find the selection, advice, and manpower they needed to invest in trees with confidence,' says Steve, who certainly seems to have fulfilled his aim. 'Customers range from large property developers who want 100 trees to clothe a hillside, to individual gardeners looking for a special tree for their new garden.'

The nursery stocks more than

350 varieties of ornamental and screening, deciduous and evergreen sourced from Britain, Holland, France, Germany and Italy. The trees can be as young as four or as old as 150 years; as small as eight feet or more than 35ft tall. Pot sizes range from 50 litres to 3000 litres – nearly six feet across and three feet deep. Among the most popular varieties are white-stemmed birches. 'We can't get enough of them,' says Steve, whose personal favourite is Swiss Glory, with its creamy bark and dark stems.

Few semi-mature trees found growing naturally in the landscape would survive being lifted and transplanted. This is because the only parts of a root system which can absorb water are the very tips of the youngest roots. The thick, woody roots function only as anchorage and 'pipes' for transporting the water absorbed at the root tips to the base of the trunk.

Trees left to grow naturally in the landscape have root systems which have extended far underground for anchorage and in the search for water. Reducing the root ball to a manageable size for transplanting would mean essentially 'amputating' the water absorbing part of the root system. Obviously, this would cripple a mature tree, which would be unable to regenerate small roots quickly enough to meet the massive water requirements of its crown.

To overcome this problem nurseries regularly undercut (prune back the roots underground while in situ) and transplant their trees as they develop. Doing this at regular intervals curtails the lateral extension of the root system and forces out a mass of fibrous roots close to the base of the stem.

The more times this procedure has been performed, the more robust the root system, and the more likely it is to establish when ultimately planted out in the landscape.

'Of course, the procedure does require additional investment, labour and machinery, and because the added-value is hidden beneath

the soil, an unscrupulous grower can easily increase his profit margin by not undercutting or transplanting,' Steve explains. 'We always check a tree's transplanting history prior to purchasing.'

New stock arrives at the nursery each winter, which are put in their state-of-the-art airpots. Made from recycled HDPE (High Density Polyethylene), these circular pots encourage the roots to produce a strong fibrous root system which establishes easily when transplanted. While in the pots, the trees are fed and drip irrigated.

'It's a balancing act – we try to keep the compost wet enough to hold their leaves, but dry enough to make the roots actively seek out the water,' Steve explains.

All arrivals spend their first season at the nursery to ensure they root out fully.

Many stay until they reach the shape the designer wants. Pleaching (the weaving together of branches to form living archways, lattice or screens) can take seven to eight years, hence the price tag of £400 per tree.

Unsurprisingly, Steve has been honoured with many awards including his 2001 induction into the Interiorscape Hall of Fame. He has taken landscape design and construction to a new level and thanks to his vision, that perfectly seamless hornbeam and Portugese laurel hedge, or that magnificent 150-year-old olive tree that you have always dreamed of, can be in your garden in days.

INFORMATION

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Open Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm
Saturday 9am to 5pm.



Above: Long needled pines provide both a luxurious texture and a screening solution

Below: Selecting a majestic tree can be an extraordinary experience

Bottom: Installing a 6ft evergreen hedge is all in a days work for the Majestic planting team

