

think big

At his nursery in Hertfordshire, Steve McCurdy is experimenting with better and better ways to grow trees... and to get us all thinking bigger

WORDS JACKIE BENNETT PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD HANSON

Steve McCurdy is a man with a mission. He wants us all to grow trees in our gardens and not just any trees, but big trees. 'Some designers and gardeners are wary of big trees,' says Steve. 'They may not have the equipment or experience to plant them, and worry whether they will establish - but we're here to guarantee that.'

Steve, who studied horticulture in England, went to California in 1979 and ran a successful interior landscape company there. He returned to England in 2000 with his American wife, Janet, and set up Majestic Trees near St Albans in Hertfordshire, which now has a staff of 16, helping clients to find the right trees for their site. '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. We sell silver birches from £85, large mature limes and chestnut for £500 and massive *Magnolia grandifloras* for £2,500.'

Steve offers more than 350 varieties sourced from Britain, Holland, France, Germany and Italy. White stemmed birches are in big demand. 'We just can't get enough of them,' says Steve. His favourite is 'Swiss Glory' - similar to 'Jaquemontii', but with a creamier bark and dark stems.

Whatever tree you want, you'll probably find it here, from acacias and robinias to the rarer *Acer triflorum*. Sizes are measured not by height but by girth - starting at a slender 12-14cm and going up to a chunky 150 cm. Here, you will find ready pollarded willows, mop headed mulberries, pleached limes or hornbeams, standard *Prunus serrula globulus*. A new introduction is instant hedging - hornbeams and Portugese laurels, already 3m tall and 1m wide, ready to plant and create a seamfree hedge.

The health of the trees is all down to Steve's experience with large specimens. On arrival at the nursery, the trees are put into high-tech airports which encourage the roots to produce a strong fibrous root system which establishes easily when transplanted. While in the pots, they 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,' says Steve. Trees are held at the nursery until they fill out - or reach the shape that the designer wants - pleaching, for example, can take seven to eight years, hence the price tag of £400 per tree.

The secret of Majestic Trees' success has been their ability to respond to customers' needs. 'We can just supply the trees and deliver them to the site or we can plant them in people's gardens and offer a warranty for their health.' Big trees are secured with underground anchors and steel cables (less unsightly than stakes or overhead wires). This avoids wind rock and is vital with trees like the huge multi-stemmed *Quercus ilex* (worth £6,000) which is the largest one available in the country.

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FACING PAGE The dramatic leaves of *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' - the golden leaved Indian Bean Tree. **THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** Steve McCurdy with dog, Tom, in the small tree section of the nursery; the peeling bark of *Betula utilis* var. *jaquemontii*; ferny leaved *Albizia julibrissin*; trees prepared for delivery are wrapped in hessian and wire; the distinctive labelling of Majestic Trees; a mature olive tree (like this 150 year old specimen) can be delivered and planted in your garden; the delicate foliage of *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Frisia'.

