



SPECIAL MENTION
Weigela coraeensis 'Alba' (far left), a fine flowering shrub, is reliably hardy, whereas foxglove relative *Isoplexis canariensis* (left) needs protection under glass in most areas in the UK



NURSERY WITH HISTORY
Hill House (left) was once the home of garden writer Edward Hyams. Splendid *Impatiens tinctoria* (above) will survive winter outdoors if its tuberous rootstock is protected



Deutzia x hybrida 'Magicien' is a deciduous early-summer flowering shrub producing arching panicles of pink-flushed white flowers. It is hardy and easy to grow in sun or light shade on any fertile soil.



New Zealander *Arthropodium cirratum* with evergreen, strappy foliage and sprays of starry flowers is best treated as a conservatory plant in the UK, although it may overwinter in sheltered gardens.



Mandevilla laxa is a deciduous climber from South America suitable for a sheltered wall in warm gardens. Twining stems bear oval leaves and, in warm summers, produce scented white flowers.

HILL HOUSE NURSERY Nursery profile

On the edge of Dartmoor, in the village of Landscope, lies Hill House Nursery which, as **Roy Lancaster** finds, is packed with a diverse range of plants to satisfy even the most discerning of gardeners. Photography by Tim Sandall

I ENJOY THE SENSE of surprise and anticipation I feel visiting a nursery for the first time, and to find a special plant awaiting me in the car park only adds to the excitement. In June last year at Hill House Nursery, Devon, it was a large *Weigela* flowering its heart out in a nearby border.

Weigelas are not everyone's favourite shrubs but for ease of cultivation and the sheer number of flowers they produce, they are hard to beat. This, however, was no ordinary *Weigela*. Its bell-shaped flowers exhibited a curious yet eye-catching mixture of colour, ranging from creamy-yellow in their early stage maturing through strawberry-pink to a darker shade. *Weigela coraeensis* 'Alba',

for such it was, has been on the edge of cultivation since first being introduced, probably from Japan, in the mid-19th century. I first met with it at Hillier Nurseries in the 1960s and here it was in a Devon nursery, which I took to be a good omen – and so it proved.

A plantsman's legacy

The nursery is run by Raymond Hubbard and his son Matthew on what was once an old tomato nursery. It comprises a mixture of glasshouses, polytunnels and standing-out areas where an eye-popping range of woody and perennial, hardy and tender plants are grown and displayed for sale. Hill House itself, a former vicarage, is home to Raymond

and his wife Sacha whose garden (open to visitors) is dominated by a spectacular, low-crowned *Pinus montezumae* (Mexican pine) planted by former owner, the late Edward Hyams (1910–1975), author and one-time gardening columnist for *The Illustrated London News*.

There are many other interesting plants here, including those planted by the Hubbards from the nursery – which, on the day I visited, was abuzz with gardening enthusiasts agonising over which plants to buy and which might be resisted for another day. One such

was *Impatiens tinctoria*, a giant busy lizzie from northeast Africa, the slightly fragrant, long-spurred blooms of which hover like big, white, magenta-stained moths above succulent leafy stems. It makes a spectacular plant for a large conservatory – some of these plants were 3m (10ft) tall – and can be grown outside in warm, sheltered places, so long as it is not allowed to dry out in summer and its dahlia-like tuberous rootstock is protected from frost over winter.

Another eye-catching plant I saw was *Isoplexis canariensis*, a native of the

Canary Islands, which has leafy stems that produce spikes of orange, two-lipped, foxglove-like flowers on a low, bushy plant. Larger is *Isoplexis sceptrum* from Madeira, with hairy leaves and flowers of a golden-brown. Both make handsome container plants under glass or for summer display outdoors and can sometimes be overwintered in warm gardens.

Abelia floribunda, one of Raymond's favourites, is a small-leaved shrub of slender growth that needs training against a warm, sunny wall the better ►



Spectacular *Erythrina crista-galli* is a member of the pea family

'I DALLIED WITH ABUTILONS, HESITATED BENEATH ANGEL'S TRUMPETS AND GAPED AT A TREE TOBACCO'

to display its showers of tubular, rose to purple flowers in June. These are said to be pollinated by hummingbirds in its native Mexico. I have a plant below our kitchen window, trained on wire supports, that I maintain with a light trimming after flowering. A large *Abelia floribunda*, 5m (16½ft) high, grows on a wall at the National Trust garden at Cotehele, Cornwall.

Beauty with thorns

In one of Raymond's display houses I admired a large shrub in a container, namely *Erythrina crista-galli*, its thorn-clad shoots sporting long spikes of large, parrot-red, fleshy pea flowers. It reminded me that my own plant, which although herbaceous in my garden, had failed to survive winter 2008–09. It was, to be fair, an old plant but its exotic displays had given me years of pleasure and (with no inkling of the even colder winter to come) I had no hesitation in

acquiring a healthy young replacement, which has yet to surface this year.

Hill House Nursery is awash with treasures and temptations and as the day wore on I dallied with abutilons, hesitated beneath angel's trumpets (especially *Brugmansia x candida* 'Variegata' with apricot blooms) and gaped at a tall, glaucous-stemmed and leaved tree tobacco (*Nicotiana glauca*) with loose terminal panicles of yellow tubular flowers. This is an example of a plant that in its native Andes is looked upon by some as a weed, while in Britain it is a treasured exotic for a hot, sunny, well-drained corner.

It is typical of Raymond Hubbard that these plants of diverse origin and exciting, sometimes challenging natures, should interest him for he, too, is possessed of great character and has a long experience with the nursery industry, beginning with his family's Springfield Nursery in Essex.



Roy and Raymond examine stock at Hill House Nursery

Cold war exchange

Raymond was also a pioneer of the use of biological controls to commercial salad-crop growers in the 1960s. His work in this field and the resultant exchange of correspondence by telegram with scientists in Russia on the subject of *Encarsia*, *Phytoseiulus* and various nematodes led to him being investigated by MI6 who suspected him of using code to send secret information! It was, after all, during the Cold War. The nursery still uses biological controls, especially nematodes to control vine weevil, and advises its customers against



HOME GROWN
Dianthus 'Old Mother Hubbard' (left) was raised at Hill House Nursery. *Abelia floribunda* (far left) is a choice shrub for a warm wall



Lobelia laxiflora var. *angustifolia* from South America needs shelter to thrive

using chemical sprays.

In talking to Raymond, I was interested to learn that his most well-known plant introduction was

Nemesia Bluebird ('Hubbird') found in a glasshouse on the nursery as a chance seedling in 1984. A more recent chance seedling resulted in *Crococsmia* 'Krakatoa', which flowers around two weeks later than well-known 'Lucifer' of which it is probably a seedling, with slightly larger flowers of clear orange. Raymond also raised, in 1984, border pink *Dianthus* 'Old Mother Hubbard', a sport from 'Doris' with fragrant, flat, semi-double flowers that are pink with stripes and flecks of darker salmon pink. It is a strong, upright grower to 40cm (16in) with blue-green foliage and was

recognised by the RHS with an Award of Merit in 1988 and the following year with a First Class Certificate.

The nursery's selection of hardy plants, shrubs, climbers and especially perennials is considerable and includes many old favourites as well as more recent introductions such as dark purple-leaved *Geranium pratense* 'Hocus Pocus' and erect, deep blue-flowered *Gentiana makinoi* 'Marsha'.

As for Raymond's favourites? 'How long have you got?' was his answer. Fair enough, but I had noted his admiration when showing me *Diascia personata* in his garden where, he assured me, its display of pink flowers continue for six months. As for my favourites, I saw many but I did sneak a last look at the *Weigela* as I drove out of the car park. ■

Roy Lancaster VMH is a member of the RHS Woody Plant Committee



HILL HOUSE NURSERY AND GARDENS

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Web www.hillhousenursery.com

Open 11am–5pm, daily, all year. Closed 24 Dec–7 Jan

Facilities • Tearoom open 1 Mar–30 Sept

• No dogs; guide dogs with advance notice

• Limited wheelchair access

Mail order: Yes

