

DESIRABLE PLANTS Nursery profile

Desirable Plants, a mail-order only nursery near Totnes, Devon, owned by Julian and Sarah Sutton, proves to be perfectly named, as Roy Lancaster discovers. Photography by Tim Sandall

FOR A LIFELONG BIRD ENTHUSIAST it could not have been a better welcome. As I stepped out of my car inside the nursery entrance, I was greeted with the unmistakable song of my favourite bird, a willow warbler, just returned from its summer quarters in Africa. The simple, liquid, melodious cadence never fails to remind me of carefree wanderings in the woodlands of my childhood in Lancashire. It proved the perfect start to what turned out to be a most enjoyable visit to Desirable Plants, near Totnes in Devon, last April. It specialises in an eclectic mix of herbaceous perennials for sunny and shaded sites, including bulbs, and their stock is choice, offbeat and interesting.

The nursery owners, husband and wife Julian and Sarah Sutton, who met while working at Ness Gardens on the Wirral in the early 1980s, describe themselves as serious plantspeople, propagating almost everything on site. The Suttons believe a well-grown plant deserves to be correctly named and try to ensure this, although they recognise these things aren't always simple.

Warm welcome

As I arrived, Sarah and Julian appeared from their potting shed and I turned in their direction, heading towards what seemed to be a small, sloping lawn. It turned out not to be a lawn at all, but a large patch of *Acis autumnalis*

(syn. *Leucojum autumnalis*), in leaf, but not flowering. It was thriving in grit-improved, heavy, fertile soil. According to Sarah, it is a picture when its small, nodding, ivory-white bell flowers appear from summer into autumn.

Most of the plants for sale are grown in frames and plastic tunnels, where the extra warmth had already brought many into flower, and what a fine sight it was that greeted my eyes. One of my favourite bulbs is *Scilla peruviana*, which I grow in a warm, sunny patch beneath a box bush, where its dense heads of

blue, starry flowers in spring never fail. Julian and Sarah grow several selections, including 'Alba', with white flowers; var. *elegans*, dark violet; 'Paul Voelker', with flowers of a curious, pale-biscuit colour, each segment with a green mid-rib; and *S. hughii*, with lilac-blue flowers opening from purple buds.

I then caught sight of a batch of *Melittis melissophyllum* (bastard balm), a British native, found especially on Devon hedge banks, with downy stems and leaves and axillary pairs of two-lipped flowers in spring. I have two kinds in

my garden, subsp. *albida*, with white flowers, and another with purplish-pink flowers. Here was a third, 'Apple Blossom', with white flowers that have a delicate pink flush. Julian told me that this lovely perennial for half shade came from Cambridge-based Monksilver Nursery, having originated in the Guildford garden of botanist and plantsman Alan Leslie.

Also from Monksilver, and recently named by its owner, Joe Sharman, was a showy *Centaurea* hybrid, *C. montana* x *C. triumfettii*, called 'Blewit'. The ►

VARIED CHOICE

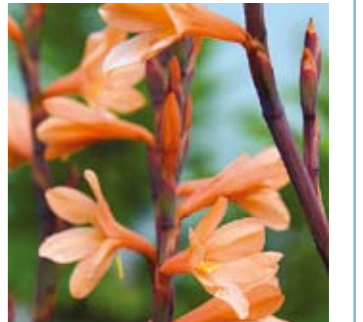
Flowers of *Scilla peruviana* 'Paul Voelker' are palest beige (far left). Dainty *Melittis melissophyllum* 'Apple Blossom' (left, middle) is a selection of a British native plant. The large flowers of *Polemonium* 'Hannah Billcliffe' (left) fade from violet to pale lavender-pink

UNDER COVER

Roy and the Suttons admire *Matteuccia orientalis*, a hardy fern (left). Most plants grown by Julian and Sarah are kept under polytunnels; the range of choice species and selections offered is remarkable

FINE WATSONIA

Desirable Plants has a wide range of these showy South African corms



Watsonia laccata is a summer-dormant species with 40–60cm (16–24in) spikes of peachy-orange flowers. The Suttons also stock a pink selection. Winter-flowering, both plants are best grown in pots under cold glass, in much of the UK.



Watsonia aletroides has two-sided spikes of curious, tubular, vermillion flowers, each with a white mouth. It can reach 40cm (16in) or more; in its native habitat the flowers are pollinated by sunbirds.



Also offered is *Watsonia* 'Tresco Dwarf Pink'. It is a free-flowering, relatively hardy hybrid, producing 60cm (24in) spikes of shell-pink flowers in summer. It likes a spot in sun and well-drained soil.

JULIAN SUTTON



ONE PLANT THAT I WAS SURPRISED AND DELIGHTED TO SEE WAS ONE OF MY OWN COLLECTIONS, *RODGERSIA PINNATA* 'JADE DRAGON MOUNTAIN'

DOUBLE CREAM

Spring-flowering *Anemonella thalictroides* 'Betty Blake' (above) is an attractive woodlander with a long season of bloom

name is an intentional pun as this plant was sent to the Suttons accidentally. It has a more open, spreading habit than *C. montana*, with big, blue flowerheads on single stems, and is well regarded by the Suttons, as is lavender-pink flowered and grey-downy *C. cheiranthifolia* var. *purpurascens* from Turkey. Of robust constitution, and equally new to me, was *Polemonium* 'Hannah Billcliffe', with erect, leafy stems up to 60cm (24in), its notably large flowers of violet fading to a pale lavender-pink, giving an attractive bi-coloured effect.

Out of Africa

In one tunnel was a fine collection of South African perennials, including many watsonias (see box, p349). They included a clear pink selection of 1m (3ft) tall *Watsonia borbonica*, seemingly more tolerant of moist ground than most, and evergreen *W. angusta*, the

same height, with light orange flowers; Julian says it is a good one for beginners. He believes that while most watsonias are hardy in coastal gardens, some thrive far inland. Some can be grown in pots in an unheated glasshouse, taking into account the size and dormancy period of the species. More specific advice can be found in the nursery's catalogue.

The Suttons have a soft spot for ferns, as I found in another of their tunnels. Prominent was *Woodwardia unigemmata*, which I have grown in a shady sheltered bed of leafy soil for years. The magnificent, arching, 1–2m (3–6½ft) long fronds of this Chinese species are coppery when young and continue to please in winter, though I tend to remove them as new fronds emerge.

Nearby I noted *Matteuccia orientalis*, equally attractive, its superb, apple-green, broad-based, spreading fronds up to 1m (3ft) long carried on sparsely



scaly stipes (stems). In contrast, rich-green *Dryopteris wallichiana* has erect fronds of 1m (3ft) long or more, borne on dark, densely scaly stipes that remind Sarah of a tarantula's legs.

Woodland wonders

Other woodlanders grown include *Anemonella thalictroides* 'Betty Blake', a charming, low, creeping perennial, producing its small, pale, creamy-green, double, anemone-like flowers over a long period in spring. From China comes *Chloranthus fortunei*, a curious, primitive perennial with erect, dark-



Dragon Mountain', selected from seed collected in September 1986 in the damp woodland margins of the Yulong Shan above Lijiang, northwest Yunnan. Its flowers age from cream, through pink, to deep red, and are carried in dense heads on stout, dark-red stems.

Being a small nursery allows the Suttons to sell plants which are in short supply without disappointing many customers. To maintain their reputation as a source of interesting plants, they travel the UK looking for new and desirable plants on which to try their propagation skills. At the same time, Julian pursues his breeding programme in search of new centaureas, watsonias and epimediums, eager to please tomorrow's customers. ■

purple stems up to 40cm (16in) tall, topped by a rosette of four glossy-green, purple-veined, toothed leaves flushed purple beneath. Its small white flowers are borne in terminal, drooping, catkin-like spikes in late spring. This plant is best suited to warmer, more sheltered situations in southern Britain; it should be protected from slugs and snails. In colder areas it makes an unusual pot plant for a shaded place in a conservatory or cool glasshouse.

One plant that I was surprised and delighted to see was one of my own collections, *Rodgersia pinnata* 'Jade

WIDE INTERESTS

Julian and Sarah Sutton discuss their stock with Roy (left). Winter-growing *Gladiolus* are one of Julian's interests; he has raised many interesting seedlings (above) between red-flowered *G. huttonii* and scented *G. liliaceus*



DESIRABLE PLANTS

Address Pentamar, Crosspark, Totnes, Devon, TQ9 5BQ
Tel 01803 864489 (evenings)
Web www.desirableplants.com
Email sutton.totnes@lineone.net

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