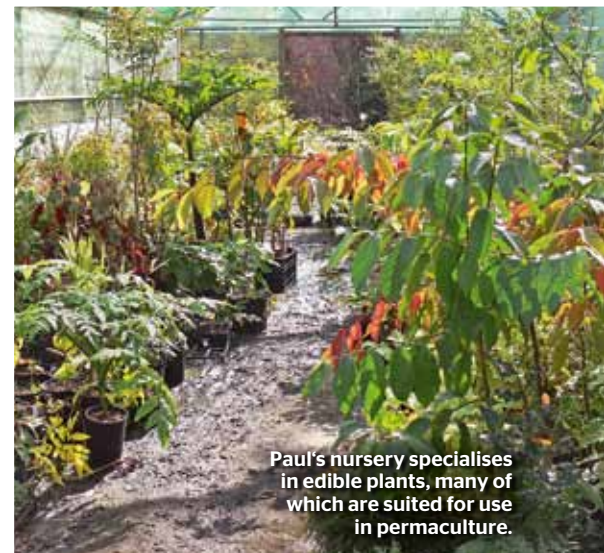


With fruit that taste of pepper, *Zanthoxylum simulans* makes a useful and attractive small tree.



Paul's nursery specialises in edible plants, many of which are suited for use in permaculture.

Unusual tastes

Paul Barney delights in strange fruits and exotic vegetables, and his mission is to share them with gardeners through his Berkshire nursery, Edulis

Author and photographer: **Simon Garbutt**, freelance garden journalist

Set back from the road, the old walled kitchen garden is cradled by woodland. It was built during the 19th century to supply the nearby house, Bere Court, southwest of Pangbourne in Berkshire. After decades of neglect the garden is now productive, but much of what grows there would have mystified the Victorian gardeners who once toiled within.

This is Edulis, a nursery boasting a large and eclectic range of unusual,

***Aronia x prunifolia* 'Viking' (above) produces berries that are high in antioxidants. This cultivar is self-fertile, grows in sun or semi-shade to 1-2m (3-6½ft) and is drought resistant. Berries may be eaten fresh or cooked.**

mostly edible plants. Paul Barney, the owner, is a traveller and plant hunter and grows many of the intriguing plants he has sampled around the world. Keen to introduce his favourites to a wider audience, he is exhibiting this year for the first time at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show (see panel, p46).

Paul is no novice exhibitor: he designed – and grew most of the plants for – The Garlic Farm, which won a Gold medal and Best Grow Your Own exhibit at the 2011 Hampton

Court Palace Flower Show. He has shown at other RHS events, too, but Chelsea is different. 'Right now I'm wondering why I've done this; a stand at Chelsea is a big step,' he says.

If the season is favourable, he hopes to show some early-maturing crops, including fruit such as honeyberry (*Lonicera caerulea* var. *edulis*), a hardy, shrubby honeysuckle with blue-bloomed fruits that are popular in Russia and Japan. Although it crops best in sun, Paul finds



honeyberry remarkably shade-tolerant, making it useful for permaculture planting schemes.

Seeking alternatives

Paul became interested in permaculture, a theory of sustainable agriculture, in the early 1980s. Although irritated by the idealism that once surrounded it, Paul’s scientific background showed him valuable aspects of what is more a concept than an exact science. Later he volunteered at the Centre for Alternative Technology at Machynlleth in Powys; this, together with a Master’s degree in Landscape Design, gave him the practical skills to design gardens that are functional as well as beautiful.

One good example of this is a remarkable ‘edible forest’ roof garden, high above a busy town-centre street, that Paul designed 10 years ago for the Reading International Solidarity Centre in Berkshire (see *The Garden*, June 2005, pp406–409). Forest gardening is a multistorey system mimicking the multiple layers of productive vegetation, from tree canopy to root zone, found within a natural forest ecosystem. Remarkably, on this roof garden, large fruit trees, shrubs and other crops thrive in just 30cm (1ft) of substrate.

Starting up

When, in 1995, Paul decided to set up a nursery to grow some of the hard-to-source plants that he wanted for his planting schemes, he returned to the Berkshire countryside where he had grown up, and to the walled

‘Paul became interested in permaculture, a theory of sustainable agriculture, in the early 1980s.’

garden that his father bought in 1959. They had grown organic vegetables there from the 1960s to the 1980s. Much clearing was needed, but rather than uproot the unkempt fruit trees around its perimeter he saw them as the ideal canopy for a forest garden, so he underplanted them with shade-tolerant shrubs, perennials and ground cover. Now these stock plants (some edible, others simply ornamental) form a glorious tangle below the apple boughs.

Paul has also planted several trees, including a Sichuan pepper (*Zanthoxylum simulans*). This dainty small tree, reminiscent of rowan, bears clusters of peppercorns with fruitily pungent, pinkish-red husks; the merest touch of the fresh husk on the tongue leaves the mouth tingling for several minutes. ‘They make a great marinade for meat. I sell quite a few of them,’ says Paul.

‘Every plant has to work hard to earn its keep in a small garden; *Amelanchier x grandiflora* ‘Ballerina’ is my ultimate permaculture plant,’ he says. ‘The spring flush of leaves is

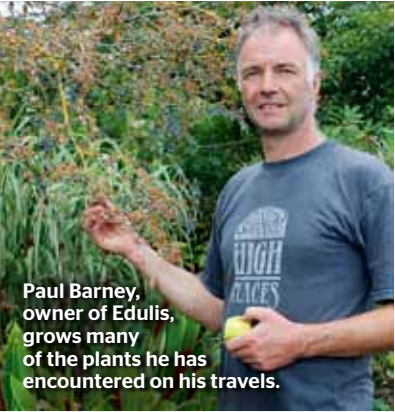


▲ Used in Asian cooking as a thickening agent or edible jelly, devil’s tongue (*Amorphophallus konjac*) grows from an edible tuber. It produces a large, dissected leaf held atop a 1.2m (4ft) stem and may also produce unusual arum-like flowers.

beautiful, the blossom is lovely, the berries are tasty and the leaves have gorgeous fiery autumn colour.’ From a visit to South America, Paul introduced a narrow-leaved selection of Chilean guava (*Ugni molinae* PAB 1347) that seems hardier than those grown in the UK. The low-growing evergreen shrub bears small, white, bell-shaped flowers followed by maroon, strawberry-flavoured berries with a resinous tang.

Exotic roots

Also from South America are two interesting root crops: yacón and oca. Yacón (*Smallanthus sonchifolia*), a tall, fast-growing sunflower relative, forms large, sweet, crunchy tubers. ‘They regularly destroy our plastic



Paul Barney, owner of Edulis, grows many of the plants he has encountered on his travels.



▼ Chilean guava (*Ugni molinae*) is a fairly hardy, evergreen shrub, slowly reaching 1-2m (3-6½ft), producing white flowers in summer followed by small red berries. These have a strawberry flavour and are eaten raw. Paul grows a selection from seed he collected in Chile that appears to be more hardy.



pots,’ says Paul, ‘and in the open ground they can produce 12kg (26 lb) in a season.’ Although sweet, the tubers can be eaten by diabetics, and yacón is now undergoing UK field trials as a commercial crop. Oca (*Oxalis tuberosa*), by contrast, is low-growing and fairly compact at first, becoming spreading later in the season. Its sharp-flavoured tubers form late in the year as the days shorten and should be harvested a



▲ Paul grows these attractive purple-stemmed selections of *Angelica sylvestris* – they produce edible young stems and leaves.

◀ Yacón (*Smallanthus sonchifolia*) is originally from South America and grows to 2m (6½ft). Harvest roots in late summer and use either fresh, like a water chestnut, or dried. Although not hardy, it will grow outdoors like a dahlia in a sunny, sheltered spot, or ideally a polytunnel. Overwinter as a tuber and increase from ‘slips’ (new shoots).

week or two after the topgrowth has succumbed to frost. Yacón and oca are best in full sun on well-drained soil and make ideal allotment plants, but for a ‘forest garden’ (which need not be large; beneath a spreading apple tree is ideal) more shade-tolerant plants are needed. Suitable shrubs include honeyberry, blue bean shrub (*Decaisnea fargesii*), with blue, bean-like pods filled with sweet pulp, and

Edible plant nursery

◀ The nursery was set up primarily to grow a large range of rare and unusual plants for Paul’s planting schemes. Many of these plants are edible, hence the name Edulis.

buffalo currant (*Ribes odoratum* ‘Crandall’) with scented yellow flowers in spring and autumn leaf colour. Paul likes udo, or Japanese asparagus (*Aralia cordata*), for its arching, architectural stems, to 2m (6½ft) in moist semi-shade. The attractive foliage is offset by heads of fluffy, ivy-like flowers in July and August. The crisp young shoots, eaten blanched, taste rather lemony. A suitable underplanting could be





▲ *Actinidia arguta* 'Issai' is a self-fertile cultivar related to kiwi fruit. It is an extremely vigorous, deciduous, twining climber to 15m (50ft) for moist soil. It produces gooseberry-sized, green, hairless fruit that ripen from September.

ground-hugging, evergreen Nepalese raspberry (*Rubus nepalensis*), which produces nodding, white flowers followed by tasty orange fruits. It grows well in shade but fruits best in sun. Alpine strawberries would also be suitable.

Edible climbers

Once the upper layers are well established, fruiting climbers can be grown through them. Japanese wineberry (*Rubus phoenicolasius*) is an Edulis favourite, but magnolia vine (*Schisandra chinensis*; clusters of edible red berries) and Siberian gooseberry (*Actinidia arguta*; small green fruits, sweet when soft) are vigorous alternatives below a large old apple tree. 'Most gardeners would plant a rambling rose in such a situation,' says Paul, 'but why not use something that's beautiful and edible instead?' Adopt the Edulis philosophy and even the smallest garden can become an exciting cornucopia, overflowing with exotic flavours. ●

NURSERY INFORMATION

Office: Edulis, 1 Flowers Piece, Ashampstead, Reading, Berkshire RG8 8SG; 01635 578113; www.edulis.co.uk
Nursery: The Walled Garden, Bere Court Farm, Tidmarsh Lane, Pangbourne, Reading RG8 8HT.
Open: Tues, Apr-Sep, and by appointment.

USEFUL LINKS:

Plants for a Future: includes database of edible plants; www.pfaf.org
Agroforestry Research Trust: information about forest gardening, as well as plants for sale; www.agroforestry.co.uk



Foliage of a grape vine takes on autumnal tints as apples begin to ripen in late summer.



▲ *Cynara cardunculus* (Scolymus Group) 'Bere' is a globe artichoke that grew in the walled garden when Paul was a boy. Its young flower-heads and leaf stalks are edible.

Ginger relative *Cautleya spicata* and ornamental rhubarb *Rheum palmatum*, both with edible stems, thrive in the nursery's multilayered forest-garden plantings. ➤



RHS / ANNABELLE TAYLOR

Bulldog Tools' edible display at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2011.

Edible plants at Chelsea

In the Great Pavilion

Paul Barney of Edulis will be displaying a selection of unusual, edible perennials on his stand (C13) in the Great Pavilion at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. He hopes to include plants such as *Cynara cardunculus* (Scolymus Group) 'Bere' and *Aralia cordata*, illustrating that these edible plants can also be ornamental.

Other nurseries displaying edible plants in the Great

Pavilion this year include Pennard Plants of Somerset, which hopes to show methods of training fruit trees, and W Robinson & Son of Lancashire with a display of vegetables easily grown in pots or the open ground.

RHS Chelsea Flower Show 22–26 May

For information and tickets, call 0844 338 7539 or visit www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea