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, 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 multi-storey 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 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 of foliage, shrubs and soft fruit plants, as well as beautiful flowers. 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.

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

Paul Barney, owner of Edulis, grew many of the plants he had encountered on his travels. Paul grows these attractive purple-stemmed selections of Angelica sylvestris – they produce edible young stems and leaves.

A Used in Asian cooking as a thickening agent or edible jelly, devil’s tongue (Anemoplopholus konjac) grows from an edible tuber. It produces a large disected leaf hold atop a 1.2m (4ft) stem and may also produce unusual arums like flowers.

Cornelian cherry (Cornus mas) is a popular shrub developed for its large, edible fruits. ‘Shumen’ is a Bulgarian selection of this Cornus mas (6½ft) in moist semi-shade. The attractive foliage is offset by heads of attractive yellowish flowers in June. ‘Crandall’ has attractive purple-stemmed selections of Angelica sylvestris – they produce edible young stems and leaves.

Edible plant nursery

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

A *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

**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