

# Michael Wickenden

The seasoned plant hunter and passionate campaigner, whose nursery in Scotland is home to thousands of unusual horticultural gems

WORDS JOHN HOYLAND PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

When Michael Wickenden left school at the age of 16 he was desperate to find an antidote to the stifling world of academia, and he found it in gardening. Over the past 25 years his collection of plants has been an inspiration to other nurserymen and women and has become a pre-eminent source of interesting perennials, bulbs and shrubs for passionate gardeners. His charm, passion and knowledge has earned him a horde of enthusiastic admirers, and he has been an outspoken opponent of plant copyright laws and plant collecting regulations.

After school, he approached nearby Gravetye Manor in Sussex. "I told them to give me a job, explaining that at £18 a week I was cheap, was young and fit and that they needed help." The owner agreed and the young hippy learned how to get up early and began to become more interested in plants. "Most of all at Gravetye I fell in love with the walled garden. They are very special places and I wanted one of my own." The enterprising Michael put an ad in *The Times* asking if anyone had an unused walled garden and at the age of 18 he found himself in Dorset growing organic vegetables in a rented walled garden.

"This was the mid 1970s when there was little interest in organic food and I had to join the Women's Institute to sell my veg at their local market." It was hard work for not a lot of return so Michael turned to gardening to earn a living.

A brief stint at Cambridge University Botanic Garden, where he began to appreciate serious horticulture and to nurture his interest in rare and unusual plants, was followed by work at Mount Stewart House in Northern Ireland. "This was the best job I ever had working for someone else. There was a fantastic plant collection and the head gardener, Nigel Marshall, was inspirational." Michael is too much of a free spirit to be confined by the demands of organisations such as the National Trust, or Mount Stewart's owners, so he left there to become a jobbing gardener and to build up his plant collection. But he continued to dream about a walled garden of his own.

By the early 1980s his collection of rare plants had grown to more than 800 and he began to sell them. From his old cottage on the shores of Strangford Lough in County Down he packed root divisions by Tilley lamp and sent them out to customers. I took £12,000 from that first catalogue. It felt like a fortune."

Michael had never travelled any further than the Channel Islands but was itching to visit some of the places his plants

came from and to collect seeds from the wild. In 1985 he organised a visit to Chile when, three days before he was due to leave, a friend telephoned to tell him about a walled garden in southwest Scotland. It sounded perfect and affordable.

"My first taste of travelling and plant collecting was so amazing that had it not been for the possibility of a walled garden in Scotland I would have stayed in South America." On his return Michael bought the walled garden at Cally, near Gatehouse of Fleet in Dumfries and Galloway, and began moving eight tons of plants from Northern Ireland.

After his visit to Chile, Michael began to travel the world, beginning with Uganda and Zaire in 1989, to study plants and collect seeds, often introducing new plants to gardeners. But the days of the dashing plant collector, trekking through inhospitable gorges to collect a few packets of seeds, are over. Biodiversity conventions giving countries sovereign rights of their plant material have made small plant-hunting expeditions almost impossible.

"Plant hunting and nursery work has changed beyond recognition in the past 25 years. And what has changed them is the idea that nature can be owned." Michael has campaigned vigorously against such regulations and against laws that allow the patenting of plants. "I speak out because it matters to me. Gardening and growing plants has taught me so much, particularly about the relationship between humanity and humanity's resources." For Michael, that relationship is at the core of the challenges that the world faces, a relationship threatened by the desire to own and control the natural world.

His passion is fired by his love of plants and his optimistic belief that there is still a thirst for interesting and unusual plants. "I have gardened all my life. My whole being is tied to the seasons. And I am still thrilled when a seed germinates or a cutting takes root. They are always special moments."

## USEFUL INFORMATION

Cally Gardens, Gatehouse of Fleet, Castle Douglas, Dumfries and Galloway DG7 2DJ.  
callygardens.co.uk

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*"I took £12,000 from my first catalogue. It felt like a fortune"*