

# Chris & Toby Marchant

Once, when he was a small boy, Toby Marchant camped out in the garden of the great plantswoman Margery Fish. He mentions the event only in passing, perhaps because he has a tendency to understatement, or perhaps because his childhood was peopled with great gardeners. "My parents knew her," he says. "They were keen amateur gardeners and plant collectors. They were inspired by the likes of Vita Sackville-West, William Robinson and Christopher Lloyd, and gardened in a loose, free style that I still admire."

Today Toby, together with his wife and business partner Chris, is himself inspiring a new generation of gardeners through the plants offered

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by their pioneering nursery, Orchard Dene. "We set out to compose a palette of plants that could be the building blocks of exciting gardens," says Chris.

You may not have heard the name, because they sell to the trade only, but you will certainly have seen the Marchants' plants in countless show gardens. In fact, it's hard to think of any top-flight designers who do not have the Orchard Dene postcode plugged into their sat navs.

Yet neither Toby nor Chris started with formal horticultural training. Toby began working life as a London-based cabinet maker, restoring fine pieces for great English houses. Chris, whose earliest wish was to be a trapeze artist, worked in 3D design, technical copywriting, marketing and finance.

They met when Toby was 21 and Chris just 19. "He would whisk me off to exciting landscapes on the back of his motorbike and we discovered a shared enthusiasm for beautiful outside spaces," Chris recalls.

Many of the top garden designers have one thing in common – they buy their plants from Orchard Dene nursery

WORDS JODIE JONES PHOTOGRAPH CHARLIE HOPKINSON

"Looking back, it all came together quite naturally," says Toby. "I became weary with the constraints of my London life and began work as a landscape gardener. Around this time the average contractor could only name about 15 herbaceous plants, and I yearned for the diverse palette that had been part of my own childhood garden." He and Chris identified the need for a bridge between the small specialist nurseries producing

wonderful plants for retail sale, and the pedestrian range of plants offered by commercial wholesale nurseries.

In 1987 the opportunity arose to use a 3.5-acre former turkey farm, and they gave themselves five years to turn it into a viable wholesale nursery. Toby sold his business to finance the infrastructure and Chris continued in her office job to provide a living while the nursery was in its infancy.

Although the first two winters were bitterly cold and the work was physically demanding, they gradually built up their stock. During this time there was a dramatic surge in the popularity of the designed garden. Sales built steadily on the strength of this and, after three years, Chris dropped her dual role and focused her energies on the nursery, working full-time with Toby. Their roles are distinct – Toby manages production and Chris leads sales. "It ensures we can spend so long together on the same site without a collision of wills," she says.

Today they are at the heart of an international community of gardeners and designers who thrive on contact with each other. "It is this pooling and sharing of knowledge that keeps the industry fresh and exciting," says Chris. Designers Cleve West, Tom Stuart-Smith, Christopher Bradley-Hole and Dan Pearson all pop up in conversation, as do the names of great nurserymen, planthunters and horticultural pioneers.

Early inspiration came from a visit to Karl Foerster's garden at Potsdam in Germany. Then in 1997 they attended the seminal Perennial Symposium at Kew, where they were reinvigorated by the ideas of natural planting pioneers James Hitchmough, Neil Diboll and Wolfgang Oehme.

With interesting people, projects and challenges to inspire them every day, choosing just nine plants a month to fill the *Nurseryman's favourites* pages of this magazine has proved something of a challenge. "We are excited by performance plants that come alive as part of a scheme," says Chris, "things that contribute more than just a flower – plants that look good as they grow up, as they flower and then decline.

"Some excellent nurserymen have gone before us and featured a few of the plants I would have chosen," says Chris. "But the final selections are all plants I use, plants I like, plants with emotional significance."

For the Marchants, it's really not worth growing anything else. □

• Chris Marchant begins a new series of *Nurseryman's favourites* in the February issue of GARDENS ILLUSTRATED. NEXT MONTH Gardener, botanist and snowdrop expert John Grimshaw.

