



# FAMILY TREE

Majestic Trees has been named Ornamental Grower of the Year 2008. **Jim Clayton** discovers a root and branch success story in Hertfordshire

WORDS: JIM CLAYTON IMAGES: STEVE BROWN

IN 1979, WHILE studying horticulture at Oaklands College in Hertfordshire, Steve McCurdy was chosen to spend a work experience year in the United States. It proved a fateful trip. While there he met his future wife, Janet, and, ultimately, the couple settled in California, where they built a business that specialised in interior landscaping for malls, atriums and hotels. Sixteen years later, judged by any professional standard, Steve was a successful man. His company had won no fewer than 93 national awards and he was serving on the boards of trade organisations. There was just one snag; Steve was bored...

'By the end of the 1990s I definitely needed a new challenge – and, to be honest, I was missing England,' he laughs. 'I wanted to come back and I saw an excellent opportunity to start again and have a lot of fun.' Today, Steve's vision has been triumphantly realised in the form of Majestic Trees, the family-owned operation that he opened in May 2002. It is now recognised as one of the UK's premier specialist tree nurseries; indeed, at the prestigious industry awards this year Majestic Trees was named Ornamental Grower of the Year.

## It's little wonder that Majestic Trees has become the first port of call for garden designers

Based at a 19-acre site near St Albans, Majestic Trees stocks an astonishing 450 varieties – evergreen, small garden, pleached, fruit and nut, flowering, screening, multi-stemmed, feathered and tropical – which can be from four to 40ft tall, 12cm to over 1 metre in girth, 80 litre to 5,000 litre containers – and at prices from £75 to £15,000. With such an extensive range, it's little wonder that Majestic Trees has become the first port of call for garden designers, landscape contractors, estate and golf club managers and, of course, members of the public simply looking for the perfect tree for their homes.

'When we started, other nurseries tended to be either good at growing trees or good at supplying them. I wanted to be the best at growing and supplying – and that set us apart,' recalls Steve. But to be judged Grower of the Year 2008 by its peers suggests that there is even more to Majestic Trees. Speaking to Steve that



Right: A typical row of smaller standard trees in autumn colours  
Below: A large specimen *Pterocarya fraxinifolia* Wingnut is pulled and brought to the yard to be prepared for shipping and planting at a project in Oxfordshire

'added extra' becomes crystal-clear. 'We're not interested in just selling you a tree, taking your money and that's it, goodbye,' he says. 'What's important is that we provide an individual solution to our customers' needs, one that is horticulturally correct and will look wonderful for years to come. That's why we provide a complete 'AfterCare' service – and also why our sales advisors are all trained horticulturists. Planting a large tree can be a daunting prospect and a significant investment: they will help

ensure customers don't make the wrong choices and, if it is required, offer personal support throughout a project.'

Managing a tree nursery has also meant a learning curve for Steve himself. 'Obviously I'd been trained in horticulture and I understand how things grow,' he smiles. 'But specialising in trees was a new skill for me. So we built a team that knew the bits that I didn't – people who had grown trees for a living for years. I've picked it up now – but I still don't know as much



as Robo, our Head Grower, or Paul, our Nursery Stock Control Manager.'

Several times a year Steve criss-crosses Europe visiting nurseries and carefully selecting and buying trees – 'as well as the staples, I'm always looking for new and unusual specimens' – which are then lifted and transported to Hertfordshire, where they are potted-up into Air-Pot containers. If there is a 'secret' to the Majestic Trees growing regime, then this is it.

The Air-Pot is a recyclable plastic perforated container textured like an egg carton that actively enhances the quality and rapid production of the root system. '99% of our trees are grown in Air-Pots,' confirms Steve. 'The roots grow naturally from the centre of the trunk to the outside where they are airpruned, whereas in a solid plastic container they go round in circles. In an Air-Pot you get a solid mass of fibrous roots in no time at all. It's by far the best method of rooting a tree.'



A wide selection of evergreens from 5' up to over 40' tall are grown to meet every need



The Air-Pot produces a fabulous fibrous root system far superior to any other production method



Steve McCurdy, MD is surrounded by an exceptional and experienced team



Numerous Birch trees with beautiful barks are one of Majestic Trees biggest sellers

Over the last year, in response to requests from both garden professionals and private customers, Steve has developed a new integrated design, build and planting service (Majestic Trees Design & Build). It has evolved from, and complements, the core nursery business. 'Many of the designers we work with prefer to focus on the creative process and they were becoming frustrated that the best build companies were always booked up. So, we put together a team of hard landscapers and horticulturally-trained soft landscapers that can build and project-manage a garden for them,' he explains. 'In addition, because we have such good contacts with designers, all with different styles and strengths, if a customer wants their

whole garden redesigned or replanted we can show them the portfolios of the designers with whom we work and, if required, make a recommendation. Put simply, whether it is large estate or a small urban space, we want to be able to do everything possible to achieve the client's perfect garden.'

Finally, if someone is contemplating planting trees in their garden, for either aesthetic or practical reasons, what are the key factors to bear in mind? Steve doesn't hesitate: 'Access is critical,' he says. 'People often don't realise how difficult it can be to get a large specimen tree in place. Also, you must think about the garden's size and how big the tree will grow, how immediate is the aim of planting the tree,

where the shade will fall and what the impact will be on neighbours. It's vital to consider all these factors – and it's why we always like to sit down and chat with our customers.'

Of course, the Majestic Trees team has the expertise to overcome all these potential problems. 'For example, we've done loads of projects in North London where there's no easy access,' smiles Steve. 'But we can always find a way to crane the equipment and tree into a back garden without causing damage. There's no limit to what you can do if you put your mind to it.'

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