

Spotlight on: John Massey MBE VMH

John Massey is a nurseryman, plant breeder, plant collector and, above all, a passionate gardener. He acquired Ashwood Nurseries as a teenager in 1968, straight from school and with no formal training in horticulture.

'It was a dilapidated place, with bantams scratching about, and washing hung out to dry in the greenhouse. I started off doing landscaping and garden maintenance, and grew what plants I had in old paint and jam tins'.

He has a love of plants that began as a child growing up in the Black Country and he was encouraged by his grandfather who taught him the principles of gardening. It was his passion for plants which was to become the driving force at Ashwood and, with a small but dedicated workforce led by Tony Cartwright, the nursery was transformed into a thriving plant nursery and garden centre within a decade.

Percy Picton of Old Court Nurseries, Malvern, was a good friend and mentor, and it was thanks to his influence that John started to collect lewisias and cyclamen. By now he had taken on board an experienced grower, Philip Baulk, who began the commercial production of these two crops. Together they started to exhibit at RHS Shows achieving Gold Medals every time and culminating in their first Chelsea Gold for a lewisia exhibit in 1996. This milestone in Ashwood Nurseries' history also saw the launch of Lewisia 'Ashwood Carousel Hybrids' and Lewisia 'Ashwood Ruby'.

Realising the potential of hellebores as another speciality crop, John was fortunate to have a talented grower at Ashwood: Kevin Belcher who became responsible for carrying out an intensive breeding programme. Their Helleborus Ashwood Garden Hybrids are now widely regarded as the best strain of hellebores ever produced, winning international acclaim and collected and grown by gardeners worldwide. In addition, some remarkable inter-species crosses have been introduced including 'Pink Ice' and Briar Rose'. More Gold Medals followed and in 1994, Ashwood was awarded the first 'double gold' for 90 years at the RHS London Flower Show, one for hellebores and the other for cyclamen.

John is also one of the UK's leading experts on hepaticas: he has his own private plant collection and has travelled to Kyrgyzstan, China, Japan, Korea, North America and Europe to see them in the wild. He has achieved an impressive record of Gold Medals for hepatica exhibits at RHS London Flower Shows, one of the highlights of which came in 2000 when Ashwood joined forces with the Niigata Nursery Association from Japan. The combined exhibit received the Lawrence Medal, awarded to the best exhibit to be shown at any of the RHS Shows during any one year.

Since then more speciality crops have been developed, notably salvias and hydrangeas, the latter having achieved a second Chelsea Gold in 2005. To date, Ashwood Nurseries has been awarded 50 consecutive RHS Gold Medals, 4 Farrer Trophies and 2 Williams Memorial Medals. In 2003 John was presented with the Veitch Medal for his contribution to the advancement and practice of the science of horticulture. In 2008, John was awarded the MBE for his services

to charity and in 2010 The Royal Horticultural Society presented him with the Victoria Medal of Honour, the highest honour they can bestow, in recognition of his outstanding services to horticulture. In 2014 he was thrilled to receive the Kath Dryden Award from the Alpine Garden Society for his work with hepaticas. John is also a long -serving member of The RHS Woody Plant Committee.

It was perhaps inevitable that, with his wide-ranging zeal for plants, John would one day find time to create his own private garden at his home, tucked behind the nursery. Again he found inspiration from two great friends, Christopher Lloyd of Great Dixter and Princess Sturdza, the formidable, perfectionist creator of a brilliant French garden, Le Vasterival and their influences are evident throughout the garden.

John's garden has now become his sanctuary, as well as a trial ground for his many plant passions. He firmly believes that a garden should be "somewhere you want to go every day of the year," and he doesn't subscribe to the idea of putting the garden to bed for winter. The result is a true 'garden for all seasons' in a stunning location alongside the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal. It has been featured on TV as well as in numerous articles in the national press and gardening magazines, and described by Carol Klein as 'the most loved and looked after garden I've ever had the pleasure of visiting'.

For John, his 'romance with plants' is all part of a large learning curve of which he never tires: 'I've always followed my plant passions rather than commercial pressures, but I've discovered that the more you find out, the more you realise you don't know.'

The garden is open on selected dates throughout the year with all proceeds going to charity. Private visits can also be arranged and John welcomes groups and organisations with a keen interest in gardening.

John's fee for talking to us will be donated to charity.

Brian.