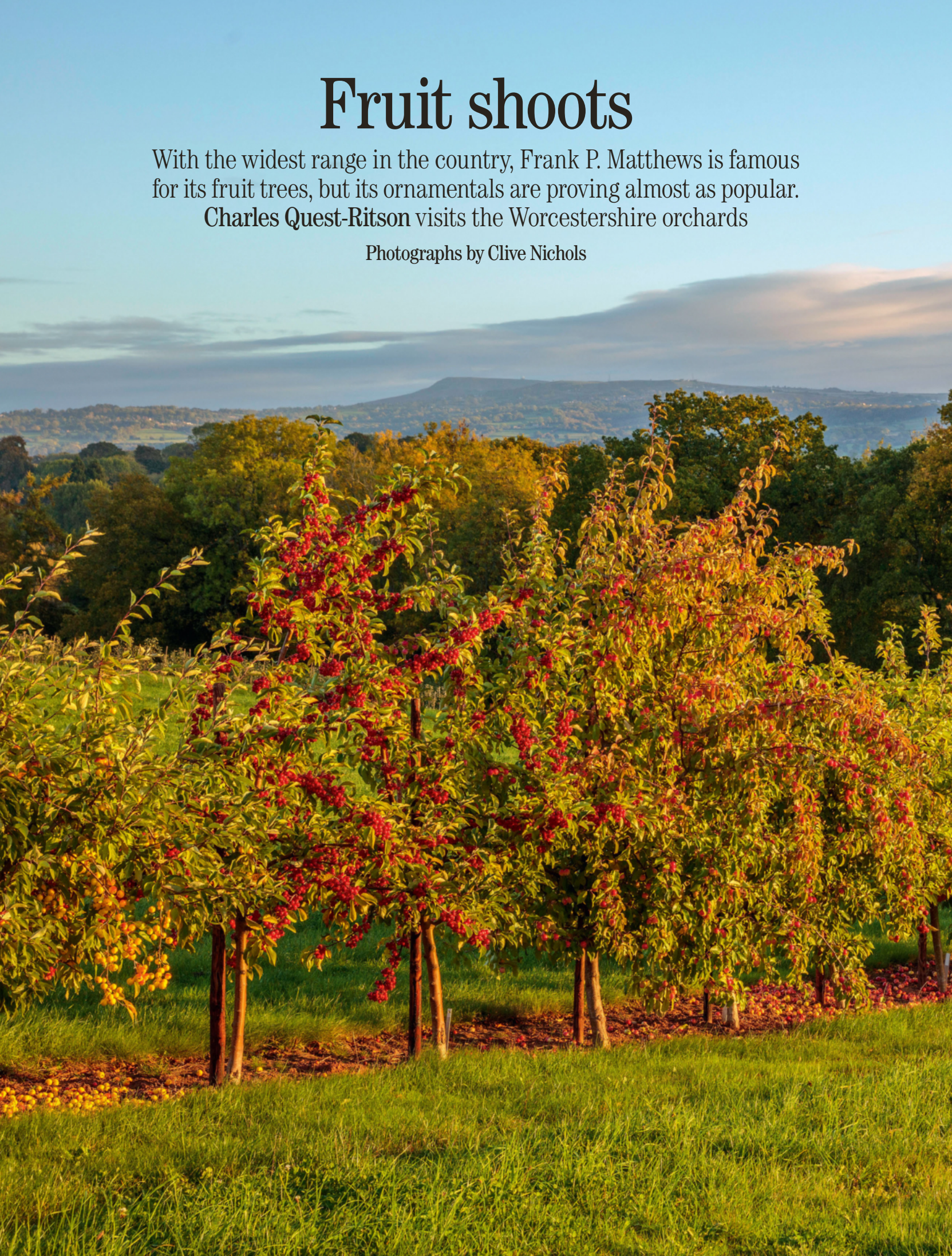
Fruit shoots

With the widest range in the country, Frank P. Matthews is famous for its fruit trees, but its ornamentals are proving almost as popular. **Charles Quest-Ritson** visits the Worcestershire orchards

Photographs by Clive Nichols





MANY visitors to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2025 thought that the best exhibit in the Great Pavillion was the display of crab-apple cultivars in full bloom, mounted by the firm of Frank P. Matthews, a fruit-tree nursery near Tenbury Wells in Worcestershire. The RHS, moving in its mysterious ways, did not award it a Gold medal, but there was no doubt in the minds of many that no other exhibit offered such interest, originality and beauty, not to mention colour and scent.

It takes time to plan and assemble plants for any flower show, but exhibiting at Chelsea called for much thought and preparation over a full four years. Crab apples are wonderful flowering trees, but no one had ever mounted a dedicated display of them at Chelsea. Many nurserymen consider them better ornamental trees than Japanese cherries because they flower over a longer period, with flowers on the tree for at least twice as long. They are useful pollinators for domestic apples, too, because they produce heavy crops of pollen. All carry fruit in autumn, which very few Japanese cherries do, and, as some crab apples hang on the trees until late in the winter, they supply nourishment for birds and small mammals over many months. As the show leaflet explained, the display revealed 'the striking diversity of *Malus* species, showcasing their rich palette of flower colours, unique leaf shapes, and varied tree forms'.

> 'Many consider crab-apple trees better ornamentals than Japanese cherries'



Preceding pages: **The orchards near Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire. Irrigation lagoons set among the fruit trees proved invaluable during the past summer's heatwave.** *Above:* **Nick Dunn, a director of the nursery, and grandson of the eponymous Frank P. Matthews**

Crab apples do not all flower at the same time. When you read that certain varieties are suitable pollinators for a particular eater or cooker, it is because they can be relied upon to flower at the same time. Some cultivars, such as 'Princeton Cardinal', open their first flowers at the end of March, whereas others, including the gorgeous violet-scented American species *Malus coronaria* and *M. ioensis*, may not finish blooming until June.

The idea for an exhibit of crab apples in flower was that of Nick Dunn, a director of Frank P. Matthews. Having joined the nursery in 1974, he had 50 years of experience of growing crab apples and was thus in a rare position to decide which varieties to choose. The eponymous Frank P. Matthews was his grandfather, who started the nursery in 1901 (it celebrates 125 years of success this year) by renting six acres at Harlington in Middlesex to grow fruit trees and roses. The business flourished and, when he retired in 1950, Matthews was able to entrust it to his son-in-law, Andrew Dunn. However, by 1956, the site of the nursery was required for a substantial expansion of Heathrow Airport and most of its land now lies under one of the service roads. It was then that the business moved to its present site near Tenbury Wells. Here, it has a holding of 500 contiguous acres where the three counties of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire meet. The soil is classified as a rich sandy loam, which is excellent for growth, although the presence of clay does not always make it easy to work. Dunn was succeeded by his son Nick, now in his seventies, and day-by-day management is in the hands of Nick's daughter Stephanie James.

'John Downie' and 'Golden Hornet' are still widely grown, despite their susceptibility to scab and premature ripening—but the five recommendations from Mr Dunn are the best crab apples for gardens today (*see box*). Two facts emerge: first, that all his top choices were bred in Europe or the US, not in Britain. Second, that none was introduced more than 40 years ago, which suggests a recent lack of initiative among most British nurserymen. There is, however, one field in which Frank P. Matthews is way ahead of other growers and introducers of fruiting trees. The leading English apple-breeder for many years was a man called Hugh Ermen, who worked at the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale in Kent. When he retired, Ermen devoted himself to raising new apple varieties. He planted hundreds of trees in his semi-detached suburban garden and cross-pollinated them, then sent his best seedlings to Frank P. Matthews for at least 10 years of further trialling before they were either discarded or introduced. →



Malus domestica **‘Orleans Reinette’, first mentioned in 1776 and probably French. A good dessert apple, juicy with a nutty flavour**





Left: **A heavy-cropping red dessert apple on trial.** *Right:* **The delicious *Pyrus* ‘Beurré Hardy’ is flavoured with a hint of rose-water**



***Pyrus* 'Doyenne de Comice' espalier. The nursery showed a collection of espaliered flowering crab-apple trees at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show last year to great acclaim**

Ermen bred eating apples, not for commercial growers, but for home gardeners, and his successes include 'Herefordshire Russet', 'Red Devil' and 'Scrumptious', all introduced by Mr Dunn and all now widely grown. He died in 2009, but Frank P. Matthews is still trialling the last of his seedlings.

Some idea of the size of the nursery's business can be gained from knowing that its production averages about 300,000 open-ground and 200,000–250,000 container-grown trees and shrubs. The scale of its commercial activity may be judged from the minimum annual quantity propagated of any given item in its catalogue: 50, but up to 1,000 or more for popular items. No fewer than 30 acres (but up to 40) are used as hardstanding for container stock. The River Teme runs alongside part of the landholding and helps to fill the irrigation lagoons. More than 90% of the trees are grown from the nursery's own mother tree stock. Although there is a small retail area, beautifully laid out and known as The Tree Shop, it is essentially a wholesaler, supplying trees to garden centres, orchardists and online businesses. However, it also supplies bare-root and container-grown plants by mail order.

> 'More than 90% of the trees are grown from the nursery's own mother stock'

Frank P. Matthews has always been known for fruit trees—its list of plums, damsons and gages is especially impressive—but some years ago began to diversify into ornamental trees and shrubs. Among the bestsellers today are *Betula utilis* 'Snow Queen', *Acer rubrum* 'Brandywine' and *Magnolia* 'Black Tulip', although Mr Dunn says that M. 'Livingstone' is tougher. Recently, the nurserymen have begun to train fruit trees into such shapes as espaliers, which are perfect for small gardens.

Mr Dunn is a member of the RHS Council and has loyally served on many of the society's committees. He is recognised as an outstanding expert on ornamental trees and, especially, fruit trees. In 2017, the RHS awarded him its highest honour, the Victoria Medal of Honour, as it did his father. It may, therefore, seem all the more extraordinary that his Chelsea exhibit was not thought worthy of a Gold medal or, even, the Best in Show award. He enjoyed planning the exhibit and is now thinking of putting on another one—determined to do even better next time.

Frank P. Matthews, Berrington Court, Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire (01584 812800; www.fpmatthews.co.uk)



Bred in Kent, *Malus domestica* Surprize has bright-orange skin and pink flesh. It won Gold at the HTA National Plant Show in 2017

Five of the best ornamental *Malus*, chosen by Nick Dunn:

'Princeton Cardinal' AGM A beautiful foliage and early-flowering tree up to 12ft high with large (1½in), deep-pink, sumptuous flowers and near-black leaves changing to dark crimson in summer. Vast quantities of deep-red, small fruit in early autumn

'Candymint Sargent' Elegant 10ft tree with charming soft pink flowers (less than 1½in) on long stalks with darker petal edges. Long-lasting fruit—small, round, dark purple and very abundant. Good autumn colour

'Aros' AGM A short (10ft), neat, upright tree with tiered branches and near-black leaves (later purplish) and flowers of deep pink with white centres. Lots of long-lasting crimson crab apples in autumn. Excellent for small spaces

'Scarlet Brandywine' Vigorous, healthy, rounded tree to 14ft with green leaves, tinged with red. The flowers are remarkable—fragrant, deep pink and densely double—followed by large crops of round, bronzy fruit (diameter 1½in)

'Comtesse de Paris' AGM A fine tree, 17ft high and broad, with dark-pink buds, pure-white flowers and a handsome display of bright-yellow fruits well into the New Year. Good autumn colour



An as-yet-unnamed pear with handsome red colouring, currently on trial at the nursery