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Fig. 1 The Exotic Garden at Great Dixter has a tropical feel, but many of the plants need to be moved for protection in winter

Large foliage and flamboyant flowers retain their importance amongst more ordinary plants in a garden setting because gardeners have discovered how big foliage leavens busyness. Tropical-looking means big, bold, and no fuzzy textures.

Pseudo-tropical borders swung into fashion in Britain after Christopher Lloyd launched his Exotic Garden (fig. 1) in the 90s though they're a bit passé now. It's easy to achieve a convincing look if you use tender materials like *Colocasia* which have to be brought under protection once frosts become more persistent, but

## Hardy foliage for 'tropical effect'

**Bob Brown**

the energy and space they consume quickly becomes a disincentive. What are needed are hardier tropical-looking plants, because most of the candidates, such as dahlias, cannas and 'hardy' bananas, aren't hardy enough.

There are good physiological reasons for the lack of fuzziness, in that it – in one form or another –



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Figs 2a & b The foxglove tree, *Paulownia tomentosa*, will have extra-large leaves if it's cut back and the flowers sacrificed.



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Fig. 3 The Indian bean tree, *Catalpa bignonioides*, enjoys full sun and shelter from cold winds. *C. b. aurea* has good golden leaves.

is protection against drought and/or frost. Much truly tropical foliage is large and relatively thin. Waxy cuticles are uncommon as are compound leaves with rows of leaflets.

Stool many trees and the regrowth will be big-leaved, but two fast-growing trees are most commonly used for this. The best is *Paulownia tomentosa*, the foxglove tree (figs 2a & b). You might have noticed in some public space the litter of purple flowers on the ground in late spring that makes you peer upwards to try to make out the colour of the black silhouetted flowers. The flowers occur only after mild winters because the buds form in autumn. It's very precocious. I had flower in six years from seed, but the foliage is the best thing. Let it get to decent size before the stooling starts because you need massive growth from a large, food-rich rootstock. The second (with more reliable summer flower) is the Indian bean tree, *Catalpa bignonioides* (fig. 3), which if left makes a stylish asymmetrical tree.

Aroids have the right kind of foliage too. Sadly few are reliably tough. I've had best success with *Arisaema candidissimum* (from China, not fussy about soil), *Arisaema triphyllum* (native to Eastern North America and needing an acid or neutral soil), and *Sauromatum venosum*



Fig. 4 The striped cobra lily, *Arisaema candidissimum*.

(the voodoo flower from tropical Africa and Asia – which belies its hardiness). *Arisaema candidissimum* (fig. 4) and *Sauromatum venosum* (figs 5a & b) have extremely large, palmate or pedate herbaceous foliage. preceded by scented pink-

and-white or black aroid flowers respectively. They revel in moist shade.

Palms and tree ferns can contribute to the pseudo-tropical look too. Gardening in exposed conditions in the cold middle of England means



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Figs 5a & b Voodoo lily, *Sauromatum venosum*.



Fig. 6 With huge fan-shaped leaves, the Chinese windmill palm or chusan palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, can become a sizeable tree.

I avoid all tree ferns. And, for permanence, only one tall palm works for me – the chusan palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei* (fig. 6), which looked

affronted in temperatures below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  in December 2010 but showed no signs of stress the following summer. Gardeners are on the whole

patient people and are unlikely to be tempted by etiolated imports from Italy. This is a relatively fast-growing tree, so ensure you plant one that's been grown hard with short internodes; you will not wait long to get the palm-tree effect.

Somehow the large foliage of rhubarb never looks pseudo-tropical – merely chilly and northern. Other rheums are better, especially *Rheum palmatum* with its richly coloured and figured leaves. Despite reputations to the contrary, none retain redness on the adaxial surface of mature leaves but the redness on young and maturing foliage is spectacular. They're all good, but I'd plump for *Rheum palmatum* 'Ferguson's Red' (figs 7a & b) as the best because of its long-fingered lobes. *Gunnera* works but it's too big for most gardens,



Figs 7a & b The best of the rhubarb family, *Rheum palmatum* 'Ferguson's Red'.



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Figs 8a, b & c *Tetrapanax papyrifer* is a giant, with stems up to 2m in one season and leaves up to 90cm across. The mainstay of more exotic gardens in full sun or part shade, established plants can survive hard frost, best wrapped up in winter to minimise the die-back of top growth.

It dies back in hard winters but recovers.

likes wet feet and needs winter protection. (An Irish customer innocently asked for “A gonorrhoea for my damp spot” – at least, that’s what it sounded like.) *Tetrapanax papyrifer*, the rice-paper plant (figs 8a, b & c), develops leaves up to a metre wide, which is too

big for my small garden at home. After hard winters it regenerates from the roots, but after a series of mild winters it gets bigger and bigger. If you live near the coast expect giant shrubs. I’d pick the rheum and the deciduous foliage of *Bergenia pacumbis* or *B. ciliata*. The

one called ‘Wilton’ has enormous floppy foliage with a hairy pile several millimetres deep. OK, the leaves only get to about 30cm and they are hairy (but maybe not fuzzy) but still they infuse my garden with the leavening effects of pseudo-tropicality.



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Figs 9a, b & c *Miscanthus x giganteus* is a sterile hybrid grass which can grow up to 5m in the UK.



Figs 10a & b The giant crimson glory vine, *Vitis coignetiae*, will quickly cover your walls and give excellent autumn colour.

If you've room, big grasses work well too. Bamboo is usually too invasive, so either curtail its vitality or use less-invasive, tall, broad-leaved grasses. If you have a problem with adventurous bamboo shoots, I've discovered that if you lift the end of the rhizome where it is sending up a new shoot by levering with a small spade and cut through the rhizome with loppers or hefty secateurs, it does not regrow. It also looks better if you remove the sideshoots near the base of the clump so you can view into and through it and appreciate

the shapes and colours.

I'm a devotee of forms of *Miscanthus* like *M. x giganteus* (figs 9a, b & c) which is truly big, up to 5m for me, and has over 25 years made a thick clump. It's not evergreen, but I have left the crowded vertical canes for many years to furnish the winter garden. About 12 years ago it got burnt in March – the flames were three times higher than the clump and the noise of the exploding air cavities in the canes sounded like a firing range. Next time I'll ensure there's an

audience to appreciate it. The grass *Arundo donax* is evergreen and, if anything, bigger. However it's more dishevelled and its evergreenness makes it unreliably hardy here in the English Midlands.

There are few climbers that do the job but the giant vine, *Vitis coignetiae* (figs 10a & b), with its rich autumn colours does. And for the truly Jurassic look include the giant horsetail, *Equisetum hyemale*, but beware, it moves, especially on good loamy soils. You might want a tropical look but hardly a true jungle!

**Bob Brown** battles with obstacles sent to vex gardeners including extreme alkalinity, wind, cold and clay in a field in a big frost hollow near Evesham.