



A Burmese nurseryman stands by a quantity of *Amherstia nobilis* plants for sale. Successful propagation of this difficult species was by air layering (see pages 39 and 40).

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## Tree nurseries in Myanmar

On a recent visit to Burma **DAVID SAYERS** saw some interesting propagation techniques.

In February 2014, going south of Yangon (Rangoon) to visit Moulmein, Amherst and beyond, the long drive into Lower Burma passes extensive rubber plantations and then fruit farms and a major centre for producing the most delicious pomelos. Few tourists have yet to penetrate very far south; it is a delightfully unspoiled region. Apart from government agricultural stations where a range of tropical orchard fruits are grown, I also managed to get to several plant nurseries. All were growing ornamental trees and shrubs to a high standard, and were importing new introductions from neighbouring countries, mostly much improved forms and new cultivars of old favourites. It seems many Burmese nurseries are supplying plants for the developing new capital city of Naypyidaw 320 km (200 miles) north of Yangon and 40 times the area of Washington D.C.; I suspect it will not be too long before a visit will be horticulturally rewarding.

The nurseries are informal, frequently visually shambolic; but the proprietor knows the whereabouts of every plant. Beds crammed full with treasures both familiar and very unfamiliar are often accessed by muddy paths in an atmosphere so conducive to growth one can almost watch it happening. Compost is made on site using rice husks and other ingredients, a closely guarded secret. One nursery even fires their own clay pots! Most offer popular tropical Magnoliaceae which are commonly propagated by air layering. To meet increasing demand, one nursery I visited had built a platform of bamboo poles into the crown of stock trees about two metres or so above the ground, a sort of roofless tree house. The branches were pruned hard to produce many new growths ideal for air layering, and standing on the platform made it an easy task. The denser and more

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Bamboo platforms in the crown of a Jak-fruit to ease the task of air layering high in the tree.

vigorous Jak-fruit, *Artocarpus heterophyllus*, whose enormous fruits of 32 kg (70 lbs) or more are borne on the trunk or older branches, had a two storey platform with approach grafting the favoured method.

Their national flower is *Amherstia nobilis*, the Pride of Burma, a glorious leguminous tree that has been said to be the most beautiful flowering tree in the world. It is thought to have come from the Moulmein area, and I am told attempts are to be made locally to try and rediscover it in the wild. The story of its introduction to England in 1839 and Joseph Paxton's specially built 'Amherstia house' at Chatsworth is well recorded (e.g. Gurney, C. in *IDS Yearbook 2007*), yet it is not that widely seen in Burma and hardly ever appears for sale. During the IDS Burma tour group in 2006 we learned from the forestry department that even today its propagation

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The spectacular flowers of *Amherstia nobilis*, the national flower of Myanmar.

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is difficult, seed being unreliable, cuttings impossible and air layering prone to rot. Young trees are also notoriously difficult to establish, and can suddenly die without obvious cause. Surprising then, when I stopped for lunch at a smart new roadside country spa and restaurant, to find a splendid landscaped garden and several magnificent *Amherstia* in a lawn bearing more flowers than I have ever seen. The garden was generously irrigated and fertilised, the most likely reason. I sought the garden manager who took me to his plant sales area and showed me 30 young trees in pots ready for planting. Yes, he agreed, propagation is tricky, but by reducing the air layer down to no more than 2 inches (5cm) including the binding with moss and polythene, he got a good take, although there were none for me to see.

The Chatsworth Trio, the sixth Duke of Devonshire, Joseph Paxton and gardener/plant hunter John Gibson, would be gratified to know their sterling efforts almost 200 years ago to get *Amherstia* into cultivation most probably gave the tree its high profile and encouraged its planting in the world's tropical botanic gardens. At the same time they might be rather shocked to learn it sells for just US\$2 a plant.