

Stowarzyszenie Architektury Krajobrazu

Chelsea – designing our future landscapes

Introduction

Every year in the third week of May we celebrate the world famous Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) Chelsea Flower Show. Established in 1913, on the grounds of the Chelsea Royal Hospital in London, the Chelsea Flower Show has become one of the most celebrated annual horticultural events in the world and *the* showcase for horticultural excellence, attracting visitors and exhibitors from across the globe.

Since its beginning, the show has gone from strength to strength and grown from 244 exhibitors in 1913 to over 600 today, including gardens, nurseries, floristry, educational displays and trade stands. It now attracts 157,000 visitors every year. It's not the largest show in the world but it certainly is the most celebrated.

Throughout its history, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has witnessed numerous changes, but has always provided a showcase for the gardening fashions and trends of the day. Show gardens have mirrored the changing enthusiasms of the garden designers, from the Japanese and topiary gardens of the early days, through the rock garden craze during the 50s and 60s, the paved back yards and cottage gardens of the 1980s to the contemporary gardens we see today.

Back in the 1990s I took part in creating gardens for the show at a time when the modern craft of garden design was really taking off alongside a revolution in spending on our own personal spaces. It was an exciting period when show gardens started pulling away from the traditional and pulled us in different directions towards contemporary styles and new environmental ideals. But nowadays I have a very different role at the RHS as one of a panel of people who select the gardens for the show and as an assessor and judge of the show gardens at Chelsea and other RHS shows.

It can sometimes seem a baffling process from the early designs through to the opening of the show and I'm here today to give you some insight and set some context for the presentations that will come later from some of today's designers and builders of Chelsea show gardens. I'll also give you some insight into how Chelsea influences garden fashion and garden trends and look forward to what the future holds for residential landscape design.

Getting to Chelsea

It's no mean feat getting a garden into the Chelsea Flower Show. Every year we receive many more applications than we have space for.

June

I tried to find some images of the Show Garden Selection Panel going about its deliberations but we're so keen to keep everything secret that no one had any photos of us selecting the gardens. But it's not a secretive process and anyone can enter a garden exhibit for the show. Entries for a space at Chelsea open just after the current year's show has finished. Indeed, the RHS has become very good at prompting designers to enter a garden just as Chelsea opens, building on the buzz around the show and encouraging potential exhibitors to visit and get inspired for the next year's show.

There are clear guidelines for entering a garden into the show and these are sent to anyone requesting them. What's more we ask lots of questions of the exhibitors to make sure they've thought of everything they need to and these are then presented in a document known as 'the brief'. Universally dreaded and intensively discussed by every exhibitor to make sure that they get it just right, this is the document, along with the presentation drawings, against which we will decide who is in and who is out. So it focuses the exhibitor's mind on what they are aiming for and what they have to achieve.

Completing a brief at the application stage guides the Show Gardens Selection Panel by highlighting design intentions and providing an overall impression of the garden. If the application is successful, the exhibitor will be able to revise the brief in the March before the Show. It is this revised brief that will form the basis of assessment to be carried out by a panel of assessors prior to judging and will also assist the deliberations of the full panel of judges.

July

The selection panel has its first meeting in early July of each year. The panel is made up of a number of experts from the UK horticultural and design industry. All are practitioners in their field and most have experience of exhibiting and judging at the RHS shows. The current make up of the panel includes design specialists with experience of both residential and public spaces including garden designers and landscape architects. They are joined by landscape builders who as well as being skilled technicians in their craft will also understand the difficulties of building a garden at the Chelsea Flower Show with its tight spaces, short timeframes and likelihood of rain at some point during the build up to opening. Of course it's a flower show so the other key component of the panel of selectors are plants people, either plant experts or nurserymen with experience of planting design and a deep understanding of how plants will work together.

We're not just looking for a good-looking show garden; we're bringing together all our experiences to ensure that all the key elements of putting on a show are accounted for. So we look at the big picture *and* the detail. Here are the key elements that will come up during the selection of gardens.

1) The purpose or theme of the garden, including its intended use, style and practicability.

For example:

- Does the garden illustrate a specific habitat?
- Is the garden designed to display particular plants?
- Is the garden sustainable?

2) The garden structures and what purpose they serve, the boundaries of the garden and how they relate to any presumed surroundings. For example:

- Is the garden part of a larger garden?
- How does the garden relate to associated buildings?
- Does the garden borrow from the permanent landscape of the show site?

3) The type of soil, the aspect and the prevailing conditions of the garden will be important in respect of the selection of plants being used. For example:

- What is the assumed soil type and characteristics?
- What is the assumed aspect and exposure?
- Is the garden assumed to be in the UK or another climate?

4) What choice of hard materials and any special features. For example:

- Explain the selection of hard materials, the finish and quality
- Explain the relevance of water elements
- Indicate reasons for the selection of any decorative furniture, sculpture etc

5) The choice of plants and how they relate to the theme of the garden. For example:

- The planting selection criterion such as is the planting selected for wildlife, conservation, heritage, ornamental or productive purposes?
- What are the key structural plants or trees in the garden and reasons for their selection?
- What, if any, is the intended colour or textural rationale?

6) Do aspects of the garden reflect or promote environmental sustainability? For example:

- Are the plants and materials in the garden ethically sourced?
- How has the carbon footprint of the garden been measured or minimised?
- How will plants, materials be recycled after the Show?

And as a panel we also consider elements outside of the garden design itself including

- How technical is the build and does the team have the ability to achieve the build in the time?
- The depth of excavation because in some areas these are limited and dictated by existing trees on the site.

- Visitors to Chelsea need to get an accurate idea of how to plant a garden – that's why it's so important that the plants people look at a garden and see that the plants will work in the setting that the designer has briefed.
- The track record of an exhibitor – have they exhibited at another show before? How experienced are their landscape builders?
- Has sponsorship been signed up because this is essential to the success of the garden?

August

It's tough and not everyone gets through. Indeed, at that early first meeting we might only accept one or two gardens for the next show but we'll go back to all the applicants and ask them more questions to fill in the gaps that they might have missed so at the next meetings in August and September we can start allocating spaces to accepted exhibitors.

We have no pre-conceptions of what will come in each year although some forward thinking designers apply for shows two or three years in advance so that they can hone their brief and start sourcing plants as much as 3 years ahead of the show.

November

With that sort of planning by November we usually have all the gardens selected, both small and large and exhibitors are getting on with the planning of their build and we sit back for a few months. The panel meets occasionally in smaller groups to consider applications for the other shows that the RHS holds, especially Hampton Court Palace and Tatton Park where there are different classes of gardens such as the successful 'conceptual gardens' category. In some years I've seen 30 applications for just 6 spaces for this relatively new category that allows designers to experiment with ideas that would not normally be afforded them by clients.

May

In March all our garden exhibitors are expected to send in a final amended version of their brief and it's this final copy that we'll judge the garden against. I won't tell you about building a show garden because I'm sure that my colleagues will tell you all about the rollercoaster ride that Chelsea is later. So I'll fast forward to the week of the show. All show gardens are expected to be finished and ready for judging by the Sunday night. Over that Sunday a small team of assessors (3 for the large gardens and 2 for the small gardens) will visit each of the gardens and get a 2 minute presentation from the designer to point out anything that may have changed from the brief. Sometimes between March and May the designer might lose a tree or need to change a feature for a good reason and it's now that they get the chance to tell us why and how they've risen to the challenge.

There are only a small number of assessors and we usually perform the assessment task over a number of the shows each year. It helps to create a consistency between the shows and the quality of gardens across the year. We'll produce a report based on this sheet that we use as a basis of a report that we present to the judging panel on the Monday morning when awards are decided.

We award points and make comments on:

- the scale of the endeavour and realization
- the overall impact
- the design
- the construction quality and finish
- the planting design and quality

And you can see that the points are weighted in favour of these last three elements.

So Monday morning comes and at 7am we set out in our judging teams to judge the gardens we've been allocated. We agree our awards and head back to yet another, but the final meeting at around midday where all the judges meet with a team of experienced moderators and we agree a final list of awards. The moderators will go to all the RHS shows and their role is to ensure that we are, as judges, making a fair comparison of gardens between each judging team at the show but also that they are fair against other shows. So nothing is agreed to that final meeting when we've discussed and awarded the medals and take a final vote on the best gardens in each category as recommended by the judging panels.

Getting to Chelsea and achieving a medal is a long road and you'll forgive me for taking that time to explain our process and the thorough way in which we select, assess and award gardens. We want to make sure that the process is fair and transparent and sometimes it feels like I've seen a garden many times before we start assessing on that Sunday. But it's a great job to have because, as a designer myself, I get to see how other people progress from the seed of an idea to achieving the spectacular gardens we see.

It doesn't take just the three weeks allowed for building but many months, and often years of planning to get to those 5 days in May. So it's no surprise that with all the thought that goes into a garden that our designers want to give their best, stand out from the crowd and catch the visitors' attention with something new and exciting.

Its from these ideas that new trends start and I've been asked to show you how Chelsea is influencing the trends we are seeing in residential gardens and public spaces today.

Designing our future landscapes

So does Chelsea have an impact on how we design our gardens? Sure there are some things that you'll see first at Chelsea. Fashions are certainly made at Chelsea but trends often take longer to germinate. Trends do often reveal themselves at Chelsea but have already started to take root in the gardening and design worlds. What Chelsea does is boost awareness and therefore give these trends an extra push into the public arena.

We have a very active professional industry in the UK with a number of organisations leading the debate across design, build, nursery and retail sectors and its at our shows that the ideas we might be debating come to the fore and into the public eye. It's also a place where ideas become reality and ideas become influential on our design profession, pushing further experimentation and ideas for future shows. But there are distinct themes and styles and gardens that run across shows from year to year and I was asked to talk to you today about the themes we have started to see in the past few years and what we might see in the future.

Fashion

Many people tell me there is no such thing as fashion in gardens. We tend to think that because we have a 250 year-old oak tree in our back garden that gardens are slowly maturing spaces. But landscape history is full of trends, fashions, manias for the latest thing and right up to today you will see new ideas at Chelsea. Here's an example of the impact of Chelsea.

From around 2004/5 a few years designers increasingly started to go down a route of monocoloured planting schemes. This peaked when this show garden won "best in show" with a planting scheme that emphasised greens with whites and creams over any colour. There was a prediction of everyone moving to purely green colour schemes and for a short period the European nursery industry sold out of cloud pruned hornbeam and there was resurgence in using this species. Indeed, there was a brief spell of every garden journalist talking about the new green garden. But designers, not wanting to be seen as followers of fashion, responded with a splash of colour, which has continued as a trend for the past few years.

But it's not the short-term fashion that we're so interested in here today as the longer-term trends that reflect what is happening in the wider world. My images show how Chelsea reflects these trends and makes them accessible to a gardening public.

Trends

The biggest changes in gardening and gardens are led by social and demographic trends wherever you garden. The world is changing rapidly and what's current today might be out of date next week. Living trends such as wealth, living units and changes in family size are

vital but so is the rise of technology and where we will shelter from the economic realities of the next decade.

In the past when there seems to have been a never ending stream of wealth we saw an almost religious conviction to stylised hard landscape design in the UK and USA that led to vast amounts being spent on sleek, styled and uber-cool outdoor spaces and a competitive streak in our clients wanting the most up to date equipment whether it was the latest counter-current pool or mature trees craned in over the house.

In the wake of a global economic crisis it's a trend that has very quickly given way to a new austerity that, even if you have the money, means that you don't want to show you have money. Everyone has a budget and for those with more than most there is still an interest in spending it on a garden but whereas a stainless steel water feature and outdoor kitchen were the ultimate statement of the new millennium we're now seeing a rapid move towards a more natural style and a connection with nature and plants where natural swimming ponds and kitchen gardens are the new cool.

We're using our gardens to protect ourselves from the outside world. The idea of the slow sanctuary means that our UK gardens are harking back to nature, wildlife and slowing down. For example the Hotmail ads for Microsoft where relaxing is the new fast living. It's actually nothing new because it's what we used to be like before the 80s. When you look across Europe you realise that in many countries nothing's changed. In the Mediterranean countries where I have worked such as Cyprus, Greece and Italy there's been no great trend towards fast gardens but there has been a growth in wealth. In the UK were starting to discard trophy styles and move towards a more muted, introspective style but it's a trend and trends will change.

Our clients may spend a lot on great gardens but they are still connected to nature. Kitchen gardens have been a feature of our personal landscapes for centuries but in the UK the idea of growing your own food has skipped a generation and it's the over 60s and the under 30s that are leading the move back to gardens that include food production rather than gardens solely for entertainment. This reconnection with food has been essential to the revival of gardening in the UK in recent years. There is strong evidence that in the future we will be even more dependent on domestic food production as resources and population growth add to food price inflation. It's a trend that has been reflected at Chelsea over the past few years but new ideas are coming through with inspirational ideas for growing food on even the tiniest and most difficult of spaces.

New technology is allowing us to work remotely from our offices, whilst the cost of travel has risen more than our income over the past decade with higher fuel costs and taxes. With flexible working and a desire to get into our cars less often we're working from home more

than ever and we're taking a part of the garden to do this. And we're also living in smaller units. In the UK 55% of housing development is now in apartments with very small or no personal outdoor space but there are increasingly more communal spaces. We are seeing significant moves towards utilising every space available including balconies, roof tops, front gardens and gardening together in shared spaces.

Environmental challenges

The environmental imperative is now the greatest influence on commercial and public landscape design. The trend back to plants in our gardens is following a move in larger landscapes away from vast areas of lawn grass towards a more conscious planting of meadows, whether led by a purely native species approach or planting design that includes ornamentals to achieve a new look to our landscapes.

For these large landscapes low maintenance requirements have been as necessary as environmental concern but the latter has focused the minds, and budgets, on creating planting schemes that create diverse habitats for everyone, including wildlife to enjoy. It is a trend that is particularly prevalent in northern Europe but because the design of these landscapes is led by climatic need, climate change and site restraints, the idea of mixed species meadows has fast been adopted by other regions as a basis for new sustainable landscapes. My own experience of designing parks in Sweden, Cyprus and France, all quite diverse in their climate and culture, reveals an interest in responding to the locality and working with what we have rather than recreating an idealised version of a public park that is no longer relevant. And because we respond locally we also source locally.

These trends have also revealed themselves in show gardens and although designers are still producing gardens that are dramatic and striking there is a move towards more calming lines and a profusion of relaxed planting that translates into our own gardens.

The biophilia perspective that is taking hold in the UK is distinctly challenging because of the greater extremes of climate that we are now experiencing. Undoubtedly we are seeing an emphasis on local character but we are losing the ability to grow some species whilst we are able to grow new species that have never survived before. The large-scale destruction of our tree populations by imported diseases mean that we are selecting plants on the grounds of survival rather than local distinctiveness.

Possibly the biggest challenge we face in the UK is to our trees. Thanks to Government funding and an appreciation of woodland we've doubled tree cover in the past 100 years. However, a whole range of our native trees including horse chestnuts (*Aesculus hippocastanum*), Alder (*Alnus*) and Larch (*Larix*) are at risk. The sheer range of aggressive new diseases and tree species under attack will lead us to a visible change in the make up of our landscape where we are likely to lose many more trees than the 28million lost to

Dutch Elm disease in the 70s.

This is perhaps one challenge that is avoided in the show gardens at Chelsea but is tackled by the learning exhibits and RHS education that aims to inform the public on the challenges ahead. I don't mean that as a criticism as we all need our fantasies about what makes a great garden and we must remember that we are talking about show gardens here, they're allowed to be fantasies and there is no requirement for them to be real gardens that someone could attempt in the UK.

Conclusion

In the future we all want to be greener but in the future it won't be just about being green. Amongst other trends we now see responsible sourcing, human welfare awareness, waterwise planting, carbon-negative landscapes and gardens, preserving native plants, traditional gardening skills, and using technology for personal energy generation.

The vast subject of sustainability and our ability to embrace all the different concepts and elements that this encompasses are a unique challenge that a celebration of horticulture such as Chelsea shouldn't be forced to embrace. However, it's very clear that designers at Chelsea are now aiming to do just that and in 2011 we'll see:

- Gardens focusing on distinct regional plant heritage
- Sustainable gardening in small spaces
- Communal gardening together
- New, exotics that might be better suited to our future climate
- Recycled, low carbon gardens

It's a distinctly exciting time for horticulture and our landscapes. Chelsea is undoubtedly rising to the challenge of representing this to the visitors and the wider public. With the support of an industry that itself is rising to the environmental challenge, the gardening public and Chelsea visitors cannot fail to be influenced by what this showcase of garden and landscape skill will offer them as a glimpse of the future.

Andrew Fisher Tomlin Garden Designers

8 Chertsey Road, Chobham, Surrey GU24 8NB

United Kingdom

www.andrewfishertomlin.com