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May 2010

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to visit

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40
pages of
premium
property



Brighton designer
Andy Sturgeon
gets ready for Chelsea



Going for Gold

Award-winning Sussex garden designer Andy Sturgeon will be aiming for his fifth gold medal when he competes at the Chelsea Flower Show this spring. After the sudden death of his partner last summer, the father of three explains to Angela Wintle how getting back to the soil has helped him feel alive again

Pictures by Kate Eastman

ANDY STURGEON is standing in his Brighton office scrutinising a scale model of a garden dotted with sponge-like trees and shrubs. "This is my garden for the Chelsea Flower Show," he says, with a despairing laugh.

Actually, he doesn't look that worried for a man tasked with designing the *Daily Telegraph* garden, one of the most prestigious show gardens at Chelsea this May. But then, Andy knows his onions. He has won no fewer than four consecutive golds at Chelsea.

"It's one of the big ones, so it's almost as if it's written that you should get gold," he says. "But the reality is that most of the pressure comes from yourself. I'm my own harshest critic."

Andy, 44, has been at the forefront of contemporary garden design for more than a decade and was twice voted one of the top 10 garden designers in Britain. Think of a Sturgeon garden and you think of striking contemporary designs fused with traditional materials, bold architectural features and innovative planting.

His latest Chelsea entry perpetuates that tradition – with three steel walls that block off and open up vistas as you pass down the garden. "I'm interested in the idea of life taking you down different paths. As for the planting, I'll be marrying plants from Chile and the Mediterranean with English garden plants to create an exotic atmosphere that feels like somewhere else – but nowhere in particular."

Exhibiting at Chelsea gives him the chance to flex his creative muscles.

WHEN TRAGEDY STRUCK

"Some designers pretty much advertise themselves, but I've tended to use it as a platform on which to be brave and have fun. Gardens are often bound by practical constraints – where to put the shed, where to put the swing. So my approach is to indulge myself, while aiming to do something that is representative of my work."

But oh dear, isn't Chelsea a bit stuffy for one of the garden design world's young Turks?

"It was, but it isn't now. And it's become a lot more design orientated,

which obviously suits me. I hesitate to say that it brings together the best garden designers from around the world because it doesn't attract that many foreign competitors. But we've become very good at designing show gardens in this country, so it's certainly the best of its kind in the world." Andy and I are cradling mugs of tea in the front lounge of his Brighton home, having decamped from his office across the road. The house has a mildly unkempt air; not helped by his new puppy, Bassie, who shreds a cushion before bounding over to playfully inspect my voice recorder.

But then, Andy doesn't have much time for housework. Last June, he returned home after a late-night meeting to find his partner, Sarah, asleep, so he watched a film on the sofa and dozed off. The next morning, he slipped into bed for a cuddle before getting their three sons off to school and found her dead.

Sarah Didinal had been a slim, fit 37-year-old and the mother of his three young boys. That day, she had gone jogging and her last Twitter post



You can do it, Andy. Champion garden designer Andy Sturgeon gets an encouraging look from Bassie, his puppy, at their home in Brighton



MY FAVOURITE SUSSEX

Restaurant: The Ginger Pig in Hove, which has an interesting menu. I've checked out all the restaurants in my area and it's consistently good.

Pub: I don't really go.

Shop: I like Brighton's independent shops, certainly not the city's Churchill Square Shopping Centre. As for plant nurseries, I like Rushfields at Poynings, just north of Brighton. It's a family-run business and they're always very friendly. I even have a loyalty card.

View: Chanctonbury Ring above Washington in the heart of the South Downs. I've gone for many long walks up there and the views stretch for miles.

Place to visit: Stanmer Park in Brighton. I like its wildness. It's great for walking the dog and there's room for the kids to charge around.

had simply read: "Going to bed happy". Now she was dead.

It was a month before Andy learned the full cause. A cold and sore throat had, unusually, shifted to her heart, causing myocarditis – a rare heart complaint. There are only about 500 cases each year in the UK.

Quite apart from the pain of his own intense loss, Andy was plunged into the world of single parenthood, with sole responsibility for three children under the age of nine. Long working hours were second nature to him and he thought nothing of jumping on a plane to shop for exotic plants. Now he had to fit work around parent evenings.

"Prioritising work over family things

has been really difficult," he says. "Our au pair is fantastic and takes the boys to school. But if they want me to pick them up, I will – and dodge appointments. That's become more important to me than the other stuff."

He took three months off after Sarah's death, leaving his staff to man the office. Family and friends rallied round to help. Parents from the Dharma School in Patcham, where the boys go to school, provided regular meals for the first six weeks and Sarah's bookclub still delivers supper every Friday evening. "It's a massive help and gives us a chance to sit down as a family at the start of the weekend," says Andy, bashfully admitting there's only a raw chicken in

the fridge for the boys' supper.

"I've sort of realised that I can cook, but I don't have the patience and burn stuff," he grins. "It's like looking after house plants. I know exactly what to do, but I still kill them. Then again, there was an assumption that, because I'm a bloke, I wouldn't know what to do, but I've always been a hands-on dad. I know how to work the washing machine and I can multi-task."

Dealing with the emotional fallout has been less easy, although Andy returned to work in September when the boys returned to school. Designing the *Telegraph* garden has been a welcome distraction. "I had a notion that it would be a good thing for me because it's quite easy to get wrapped up in Chelsea. I also felt I needed to have some goals and markers that were looking forward rather than back."

In spite of his personal difficulties, he has lost none of his competitive edge. "That will never change – and the worst thing about competing at Chelsea, year on year, is that you have less and less excuse not to get gold because you know how it works."

FASHION FADES, BUT STYLE REMAINS

Gardening was by no means the obvious career choice when Andy was growing up in Surrey. When he left school with poor A-levels, he'd planned to go into the Army but when that didn't work out he joined his elder brother's landscape construction business.

He studied indoor landscaping at the Welsh College of Horticulture and spent his sandwich year at the RHS garden at Wisley, where he acquired a comprehensive knowledge of plants. Then he worked with designer David Stevens, learning the business of commercial design. His thoughts turned to setting up on his own, but it was before the great boom in garden design – so, in 1994, he sold his business, and went travelling.

He returned to Britain in 1997 on the day that Tony Blair became Prime Minister. There had been such an explosion of interest in garden design that he thought he had missed the boat, but he quickly grasped the nettle by



writing a book, *Planted*, which gave the plodding world of garden publishing a kick up the backside. This spring marks the publication of his latest book, *Big Plans, Small Garden*, which shows how to maximise space in restricted areas like balconies, basements, roof gardens and courtyards. His publishing success brought acclaim both here and abroad, and won him numerous television opportunities. He's probably best known for his spot on BBC2's *Small Town Gardens* series and his coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show.

Design work also flooded in – commissions ranged from unique roof gardens and large country estates across the UK to international projects in Hong Kong and Rwanda. “One of my driving philosophies is that we should be designing gardens that are fairly timeless. I tend to avoid shiny metals, glass and plastics – all those funky materials that tend to date a garden – in favour of natural materials. There's a great quote from Mary Quant: ‘Fashion fades, but style remains’. Every year in the run up to Chelsea, I get asked: ‘What's the hottest thing?’ but it's a kind of nonsense question in gardening, where everything moves so slowly.”

Andy moved to Brighton in 2001, lured by the sea. “This was the first house we saw. I was partly attracted by

the garden, which looks a disaster now, but will soon get its spring revamp. I planted hundreds of bulbs in the autumn. I did a fair bit of gardening after Sarah died. It was good to do something physical.”

He first came to the city for bucket-and-spade trips as a child. “The great thing about living in Brighton is that you've got the city, the sea and the countryside all within a few miles.

BOTANICAL ODYSSEY

“You can decide what to do on the spur of the moment. It still makes me laugh that Brighton's a city because I still think of it as a great big village.”

He says we have some wonderful gardens on our doorstep and singles out Nymans and Great Dixter. “Nymans is famed for its wonderful magnolias and rhododendrons, but it also has lots of unusual plants, too – it's a botanical odyssey. I love Great Dixter because it's so innovative and there's always a real buzz about the place because it employs a lot of students and interns.”

Can he offer some tips for planting for the Sussex soil and climate?

“That's a difficult one because it's so varied. In Brighton, it's all chalk, but further inland – near Nymans and Leonardslee – the soil is very acid. As for the climate, it's brilliant here on the

coast and I can grow plants that usually only thrive in London or the West Country. I've even got a number of Australian, Taiwanese and New Zealand plants, which are on the tender side.”

One piece of soil that will always have a special place in Andy's heart is in a Sussex field planted with saplings. Sarah is buried there and he has marked the spot with a yew tree. “Woods were one of Sarah's favourite places,” he says quietly.

The Chelsea Flower Show will fall just before the first anniversary of her death and it will be doubly hard for Andy because she was involved in the show for the first time last year – doing public relations for a friend.

He has never resorted to anger and is philosophical about the hand fate has dealt him. “Temperamentally, I'm quite sunny, though I can't deny that my life is quite lonely. Thankfully, the boys seem to be coping really well. They're amazing. And they're obviously a big help to me in that respect. It has made us all very close. We were quite close already, but this has brought us even closer.”

FIND OUT MORE

To find out more about Andy Sturgeon, visit www.andysturgeon.com

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show runs from May 25-29 at the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, London. www.rhs.org.uk

WIN ANDY'S BOOK

Big Plans, Small Gardens by Andy Sturgeon is published by Mitchell Beazley at £16.99. octopusbooks.co.uk

We have six copies to give away. To be in with a chance of winning, simply answer this question: How many times has Andy Sturgeon won a gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show?

Send your answer, including your name and address, on a postcard by May 30 to: Simon Irwin, Editor, Sussex Life, Baskerville Place, 28 Teville Road, Worthing, West Sussex BN11 1UG