

StarTwo chats with British garden designer Andy Sturgeon who won this year's top honour at the 2010 Chelsea Flower Show.

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GRIEF affects people in many ways. They drink, delve into depression, overwork or become reclusive.

Award-winning British garden designer Andy Sturgeon expresses overwhelming sorrow through a hauntingly beautiful garden that serves not as a sad memorial, but rather an inspiring representation of a woman who had cherished life and all its unexpected twists and turns – a woman whom he had loved, and then lost so suddenly.

This garden, with its simple yet strong metaphor for life, won Sturgeon the coveted Best in Show award at this year's Chelsea Flower Show in England.

The gravel courtyard design with strong lines and sculptural forms evokes moments of meditative self-searching as it unfolds like a living landscape. With a lively Mediterranean feel and complex, exuberant planting, the garden bursts with optimism, light and colour.

Sturgeon designed it with two stone paths to take – a direct route or a winding tour. Each provides different experiences, while steel screens along the way reveal and conceal views, allowing you to glimpse what you might have experienced if you'd gone on the other path.

As the fashionable catwalk of the British gardening world, winning Chelsea's top award marks the pinnacle of Sturgeon's career. *The Daily Mail* hailed him as the "David Beckham of the gardening world".

But the triumph was bittersweet for Sturgeon. His design was inspired by his childhood sweetheart and partner Sarah Didinal who'd died from heart arrhythmia in her sleep last June, leaving him with three boys, Luke, 10, Cameron, seven, and Tom, five.

"It has been a very emotional journey for me; things like this make you think a lot about life," Sturgeon, 44, says quietly, when we meet during his recent visit for the Putrajaya Floral Festival.

"The garden was meant to be optimistic, not morose. We always wonder what would have happened if we'd made different choices, went a different path? We may not necessarily have a worse or better experience, but just different."

Planting a career

Gardens are certainly a metaphor for life. A garden thrives or dies depending on the effort we put into nurturing and caring for it.

Sturgeon's blooming career wasn't always about winning his four Chelsea Gold Awards or receiving his highest honour from Queen Elizabeth II this May.

Two decades ago in his hometown of Surrey, he was raking gravel, mixing concrete and laying patios as a jobbing gardener in his brother Neil's landscaping business, which he joined after leaving school.

His father was a bank manager and his mother ran a sweet shop.

"Mum was a keen gardener while dad did the practical work like digging and pruning," says Sturgeon.

"We were always outdoors in our garden or orchard. I've always liked nature and animals. I nearly became a vet, but seven years of study was too much! I enjoyed gardening's physical side but I also wanted to design gardens and there weren't courses offered."

Sturgeon studied plants at the Welsh College of Horticulture, graduating in 1987. He tended the Royal Horticultural Society's Wisley Garden, and ran his garden maintenance business for six years.

In those days, people equated landscape designing with building fences. There was little demand, nor were there books, garden-



ing programmes or specialised magazines. Sturgeon got all his inspiration from John Brookes' book *Small Gardens* and Anthony Paul's *The Water Garden*.

Recession arrived and, in 1994, he sold his business and travelled.

Sturgeon spent a year in Africa where he studied various gardens. Then he travelled across Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, and ended up building a bridge for several months in Hong Kong.

"That period was for me to observe different terrains and climates plants thrive in, and to understand how they grow together in the wild or when used with architecture and art," recalls Sturgeon.

"I just went down a different path to end up where I am. And I think all my experiences came together like a jigsaw puzzle later on."

Sturgeon returned home in 1997 to find a huge explosion of interest in gardening.

"A theory goes that we long to return to the simple comforts and pleasures of our homes during trying periods," explains Sturgeon.

"After the Second World War, there was a revival in cottage gardens. People wanted to return to the romantic idea of what England was like, peaceful, pretty and simple, before the ruin that came with war. I think it's the same during recessions. People desire to improve their surroundings as the outside world becomes difficult."

Sturgeon's break came in 1998 when

Down the garden



Exotic garden: Andy Sturgeon's design for *The Telegraph* won the top prize at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. The contemporary gravel garden design combines flavours of the Fynbos of the southern Cape, the Maquis shrub land of the Mediterranean, the Chaparral of California and Mexico, and the Matorral of central Chile.

The planting exudes an exotic atmosphere but tempered with familiar English garden plants.

Corten steel screens slice through the garden fusing architectural and sculptural qualities to define spaces, where they conceal yet reveal scenes as visitors navigate the linear natural stone paths through the garden.

The journey culminates in a courtyard where the shade of a pinetree and sound of running water create a contemplative space. This winning garden was inspired by Andy's partner Sarah whose pretty *Salvias* she had loved flourish throughout the patch. – Photos courtesy of Andy Sturgeon

Hodder & Stoughton published his book *Planted*, which simplifies home gardening with a comprehensive introduction of plants. He made gardening groovy, fun and inspiring. The book was a springboard and he rode the wave as a pioneering modern garden designer.

Sturgeon wrote a second bestseller *Potted*, highlighting indoor plants that thrive in various conditions, and introduced varieties that are "kitschy, pariahs, challenging or plain unkillable". He steers readers from garden-variety African violets or poinsettias, and towards cool calatheas instead.

"Plants are good for your health and for your soul. They can be stylish, sexy even, but they should be part of your room design and not some apologetic afterthought," he wrote in an easy narrative.

Sturgeon became busy with gardens for homes, roofs, commercial spaces, towns, and shows. He presented BBC gardening shows and became a columnist for *The Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Daily Mail*.

He won his first silver award at the 1998 Hampton Court Flower Show. Then came a silver in his first Chelsea Show in 2001 followed by four gold medals for his gardens for Cancer Research UK and Merrill Lynch.

"I created some real howlers in my early days!" Sturgeon says, chuckling.

"I like to learn from one project to the next. Garden design is also about problem solving, about understanding how plants and materials work together, and having a grasp of scale and proportion that comes with experience. As I move on, I find my style narrowing.

"I love using natural materials like Portland stone and timber with soft, exuberant plant-

path



The design for The Cancer Research UK show garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2008 won a Gold Medal. It was created in the style of a contemporary woodland garden.



Happier times: Andy and Sarah with sons Luke and Cameron in their garden, just a year ago, before Sarah's untimely death at the age of 37. (Pic right) Andy Sturgeon celebrated the pinnacle of his career when his garden was awarded the coveted Best in Show prize at the 2010 Chelsea Flower Show by Queen Elizabeth II.



ing. There's always a strong, simple architectural or sculptural element to my design."

From a fusion of bold tropical plants in a mock colonial setting for his first show in 1998, Sturgeon has evolved to reflective, abstract ideas. His 2005 Chelsea garden had mysterious square voids in a pond filled with black-dyed water.

Judges loved his confident use of space in his winning garden this year. Chief assessor Andrew Wilson commented that "Andy's planting retains a wonderful subtlety ... the plants look as if they were enjoying themselves. The garden feels as if it has always been here."

Sturgeon is now known for creating stylish, modern landscapes blending natural materials with contemporary elements. Striking architectural schemes combine with soft, natural moods. He incorporates unique lighting, sculpture and furniture to add ambience, and now designs his own range.

Sturgeon's global experience is handy as he creates gardens from Moscow to Singapore today. He is juggling with a huge commercial development in Hong Kong and a 5.7ha garden at England's Fulham Place. In Kigali, Rwanda, he is designing a genocide memorial garden. It features two separate stone walls curving around a hilltop, eventually uniting as a single wall symbolic of the violent division and subsequent reconciliation between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes.

"I like to spend time with my clients to better understand their lifestyle because gardens reflect who you are," Sturgeon explains his private commissions.

He describes his own garden as "a little bit wild and untidy!" It's narrow, branching off into compartments, including a tree fern glade with a boardwalk, vegetable patch and a children's play area. His favourite garden is

Scotland's Garden of Cosmic Speculation.

"It's weird, wild and unique," he says. "It was designed with many hidden meanings. Though vastly different from what I do, I enjoy its creativity and energy. I like to give my gardens some sort of meaning. It's a traditional idea in England dating back hundreds of years where gardens tell a story or express a political belief."

"A good garden to me has atmosphere. It's about creating a place, where people want to visit and linger. And I love the idea that a tree planted might still be there in 100 years' time."

While going green is a buzzword today, sustainable practices have always been part of Sturgeon's work such as using recycled stone and timber, rain water harvesting, grey water recycling, designing drought-tolerant planting, implementing green walls and roofs, creating maximum biodiversity within planting schemes and having low carbon lighting, energy controls and management.

"Many people are jumping on the green bandwagon, but I suppose it's great that there is better appreciation for nature," says Sturgeon.

"Working with things that grow, live and die, has given me a perspective of life, which is we can't control nature. After a year or two of creating a new garden, it looks really fantastic. But I'd return in five or 10 years and find it completely changed. Nature finds its own way, so does life."

"I was just a simple gardener and today, I'm designing gardens around the world. I'm very lucky to have arrived at this point, and my life has certainly turned in unexpected ways."

■ To view Andy Sturgeon's work, visit www.andysturgeon.com



Home-office: Another Gold Medal winner was this garden for Merrill Lynch named The Studio Garden showcased at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2005. It was designed to be an extension of the home, an idea that was becoming much in vogue. It was to be a home-office for someone in a creative profession. Contrasting textures provide an interesting, changing, contemplative view that enhanced the work environment. The garden has a practical side, as al fresco meetings can be hosted on the terrace. In warmer weather, the benches provide a relaxing environment away from the office.



The Chelsea Town Garden design was in keeping with the architecturally historic setting yet had a contemporary approach and timeless feel. Inspiration was drawn from the work of Dutch Master Johannes Vermeer. Andy's design introduced a new dining area as the heart of the garden to get away from a corridor feel. Serpentine benches lead through the garden and define various spaces for planting and paving, while curved wall monoliths provide a backdrop to the planting, create privacy and introduce a sculptural, inviting element of mystery.



The Docklands Roof Terrace design was a private project for a 28-year-old bachelor client in 2006. Entertaining was important and using the garden at night was a priority where he wanted a cool, modern and stylish garden with a 'wow' factor. The roof terrace has a 360° view of London. Inspired by the proximity of the River Thames which curves around the building below, the design includes a large area of gravel, cobbles and boulders to create a beachside effect. A campfire was created using a gas-powered flambeau and surrounded by sculptural oak cube seats.