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'Give your garden heart and soul'

EXCLUSIVE with Andy Sturgeon

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Going for gold

Six-time Chelsea Flower Show gold medalist, **Andy Sturgeon**, talks about designing gardens with 'heart and soul' and making the Queen chuckle

Nicola Stocken Tomkins
Nicola travels all over the UK photographing outstanding gardens

On the face of it, garden design seems to be largely absorbed with plants and architecture, but behind these essentials lies something more elusive. 'I try to give a garden heart and soul, to create a place with atmosphere that people desire to be in. Even with a show garden, I want people on the outside to long to be within,' states Andy Sturgeon, garden designer, author and TV presenter. His philosophy harks back to a childhood in which the great outdoors was hugely influential, especially Claremont Landscape Garden in Surrey. 'It was very overgrown and wild, and as young children we played among the huge old rhododendron trunks – there was this sense of discovery and an atmosphere that you became immersed in,' he explains.

There followed a succession of teenage expeditions – kayaking, mountain walking, climbing and camping. 'It was being outdoors and experiencing the countryside and nature close up that really triggered my interest in gardening,' believes Andy. A brief flirtation with an army career – 'I liked the outdoors bit, but wasn't keen on the discipline or killing' – was followed by a spell working with his older brother, Neil, a landscape gardener. 'It all slotted into place then,' he recalls. 'It was such satisfying work, whether I was laying walls and paths, or planting a tree, knowing it'd be there in a hundred years time.'

Unencumbered by the baggage of being steeped in traditional gardens, Andy created some novel designs during this period, but became increasingly aware that, whereas he knew about landscaping and shrubs, much of the plant world was a mystery. 'I didn't have a clue about perennials,' he admits, 'so I decided it was time to learn properly about horticulture.' Three years later, in 1987, he graduated from the Welsh College of Horticulture – having spent the middle year at RHS Wisley focusing on plants – and went to work for the garden designer David Stevens, prior to setting up on his own consultancy.

It was the beginning of the late eighties' economic recession, and Andy spent much of the next five years focusing on garden maintenance. 'I learned how to prune just about anything, how to maintain lawns – I even attended a course on spraying chemicals but, having learnt, decided to never spray again.' Somewhat disillusioned with a garden design culture that was not receptive to his clean, contemporary style, Andy went travelling, spending a year in Asia and another in Africa. 'I'd studied tropical plants at college, and to see them growing in the wild gave me a sense of where they came from and how they grew.'

His return to Britain in 1997 coincided with the success of the BBC's programme *Ground Force*. Gardening was thoroughly in vogue, and Andy was in demand as a newspaper columnist and author – his first book *Planted* was published in 1998, soon to be followed by *Potted*. Writing led to television programmes, and coverage of the annual Chelsea Flower Show. Based on his travels, he also created his first show garden, complete with a Balinese hut, at the Hampton Court Flower Show. 'I call it my Disney period.' But it was at 2005's Chelsea Flower Show that the turning point came when he won the first of six gold medals to date, for an uncompromisingly modern and beautiful design that guided some 50 oak cubes stepping through magical planting to a serene pool. 'That was what really put me on the map,' he says. 'I'd managed to show that you can have a contemporary garden without resorting to glass and stainless steel.'

> "And no garden would be complete without a euphorbia somewhere..."

After such acclaim, it might be tempting to quit whilst ahead, but Andy has returned again and again, culminating in winning Best in Show RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2010 and another gold medal this year. As a result, he has met the Queen on a few occasions. 'I always like the fact that it's easy to make her smile and laugh,' he says.

CONTEMPORARY: Oak cubes and box balls create rhythm through a bed of grasses mixed with Tulipa 'Queen of the Night', hellebores, acanthus, salvia, aquilegia, euphorbia and rheum.

PHOTOS: NICOLA STOCKEN TOMKINS

WINNER: Garden Designer Andy Sturgeon wins gold at the Chelsea Flower Show for his show garden with its infinity pool, shady pavilion, curving concrete seat and prairie style planting

SHOWTIME: Space divided by Purbeck stone walls, steel screens, pots of iris and beds of myrtle, verbascum, salvia, catmint, pittosporum, geum, fern, linaria, eryngium, euphorbia. Awarded Best in Show Chelsea Flower Show 2012

Even the royal smile cannot compensate for the extraordinary demands of creating a show garden – financial, physical, emotional as well as the amount of time – so why does he keep doing it? 'I enjoy the challenge, not only to design and build a garden in a limited amount of time, but it must be perfect and look good from both inside and out,' he explains. 'Also, it's totally unlike making a real garden which can be quite slow-paced. This is the only time you'll find the words 'gardening' and 'adrenaline' in the same sentence.'

Nonetheless, Andy has designed countless real gardens for clients all over the world, developing certain signature plants which include heavenly bamboo (Nandina domestica) which he finds 'so useful, it's always doing something' and, for similar reasons, the multi-stemmed Amelanchier lamarckii. Then there's Stipa arundinacea, which has the delightful habit of self-seeding all over the place, and Salvia x sylvestris 'Mainacht', a blue-coloured flower that manages to be strong without dominating. 'And no garden would be complete without a euphorbia somewhere,' he adds.

He has worked on a wide variety of commissions, but one of the most fascinating and emotive was the design for a genocide memorial garden in Rwanda. 'It involved a good depth of understanding, and was so much more profound than the usual domestic situation,' he reflects. Frustratingly, the project has stalled because of political issues. However, he has since returned to Africa – 'a continent that gets under your skin' – on a seed-collecting mission to Kenya on behalf of Kew's Millennium Seed Bank. 'We were taken by the Maasei herdsmen to see the plants they use for collecting cow's milk, to clean their teeth or treat illnesses,' he notes. His mission combined botany with horticulture, and involved collecting seed from specific acacias. 'There are hundreds of different species, but they're all brown and look identical!'

Between overseas trips, planning show gardens and a thriving design practice, Andy juggles family life, no mean feat since the tragic death in 2009 of his partner, Sarah, left him alone to bring up their three sons Luke, 12, Cameron, 9, and Tom, 7. 'All the plates are spinning happily in the air, and then you see one wobble – I break quite a few, especially during the time around the Chelsea Flower Show when I spend too much time away,' he adds.

Once home again, and he is quick to share with his boys the kinds of outdoor activities he loved as a child – snowboarding in the mountains, or kayaking in the sea near his home in Brighton. 'And I've this ambition for us to sail hobie catamarans together.'

Life has not been plain sailing, but Andy is essentially an optimist who relishes goals and challenges. He also possesses a formidable talent, so it is no surprise that he is widely considered one of Britain's leading garden designers. 'I've certainly served my apprenticeship,' he says modestly, pointing out that it did not include studying garden design, something he now considers an advantage. 'It means that I've not really been influenced by anyone, and don't feel limited by convention,' he says. 'It'd be easy to settle into a style and repeat it, but I'd find that dull. I'm constantly in pursuit of something different.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

Andy Sturgeon, Garden Design, 20 Clermont Road, Brighton BN1 6SG.
Tel: 01273 553336. Website: www.andysturgeon.com