



# Chelsea Centenary

*100 years of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show*



Rusting steel is used to contrast with naturalistic planting in Tom Stuart-Smith's 2008 Chelsea garden.

# Reflecting a changing society

Both garden design and society have changed since the early RHS Chelsea Flower Shows. Now the show gardens inspire and influence many more home gardeners >>

Author: **John Brookes**, garden designer and author

The visual pleasure of a visit to RHS Chelsea Flower Show and its gardens mirrors not only how fashions in garden style have changed, and continue to do so, but also how society has altered. The show has moved from an emphasis on gracious living and grand gardens to a more modest styling achievable by many more gardeners.

## Formal layouts

In the years between the two world wars, garden design (such as it was) was in the mood of the Arts and Crafts movement with formal layouts. Part of this ethos were the famous rock gardens built along the Embankment side of the Royal Hospital grounds.

Much was written at the time about the construction of these gardens – use of differing rock types, as well as the introduction of water through ponds and waterfalls.

I first visited Chelsea in the late 1950s, when the numbers of rock-garden displays had diminished. The show gardens were in the last gasp of the Arts and Crafts style, in what also became known as the ‘Surrey garden tradition’ of acid-loving plants. ‘Surrey’, I suspect, because of Gertrude Jekyll’s influence on planting design from her home near RHS Garden Wisley in Surrey.

Coming from the north of England, the lush show gardens thriving on acid soil were a visual feast for me. But overlaying the whole event was the social superiority of the RHS itself. It used to be said that RHS committee members either had a head gardener or were one.

It was this whiff of privilege that provided the backdrop for my early interest in garden design and, I suppose, my potential clientele. At that time, one needed ‘grounds’ for such concerns and the staff to manage them.

## A modern eye

The Festival of Britain in 1951 had been an amazing eye-opener in terms of garden design. It was not just the hugeness of the concept of the Festival itself, but also the external planting and construction detail of the Festival Pleasure Gardens and landscaping as well, not necessarily



THE ARCHITECTS' JOURNAL

The Vilmorin-Andrieux potager garden of Chelsea 1958. The author particularly remembers the beautifully trained espaliered trees it featured.

on a domestic scale, but different to my eye – and modern. This word has since become loaded, I fear, but only slowly did it start to penetrate the horticultural world.

When I was a student in the 1950s, some of us persuaded the RHS to show garden-design plans from members of the Institute of Landscape Architects (now the Landscape Institute) in a special design tent. Fairly well tucked away, it only became popular when it rained.

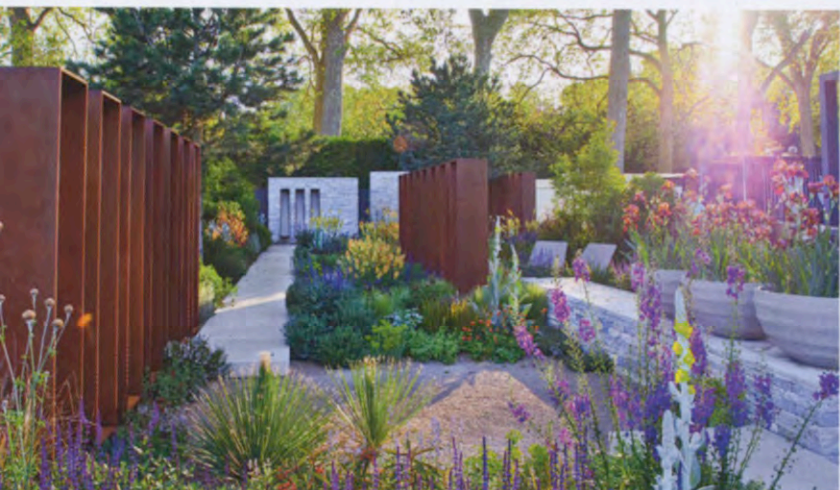
The concept of small-garden design was new. It started when domestic house construction and New Town building started to take off in the 1960s, and brought with it a need for small garden layouts for family use.

Old horticultural hands thought (I believe quite rightly), ‘what do these youngsters know about growing?’ I admit we knew little, but we were interested in putting plants together to make a composition and, moreover, how to use hard materials to create a working surround to buildings and provide the setting in which to plant them.

We were interested in the design of the garden in its own right, and to consider not only formal symmetrical design, but think about an asymmetrical, even abstracted concept of a garden layout. Garden design is an art form after all. Various Scandinavian and North American designers (such as Thomas Church and Garrett Eckbo) gave evidence to this new concept.

The ghosts of earlier garden designers – such as Ralph Hancock and Eleanor Sinclair Rohde – danced around the flower show at this time. I recall seeing an elderly Percy Cane exhibiting drawings, but earlier in his career he had built gardens as well.

However, gardens at Chelsea had nearly always been built and shown by nursery firms with a landscape constructional department. The first of these to excite my



RHS/NELL HEPMORTH

Formal planting has given way to more naturalistic, compact use of plants balanced by stark modern structures, as in Andy Sturgeon’s design in 2010.



MICHI / MARIANNE MAJERUS

The use of vegetables in show gardens has become more popular - matching the recent resurgence of 'grow your own' - as in this 2008 garden by designers del Buono Gazerwitz.



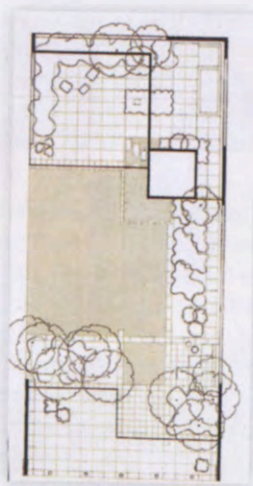
BETH CHATTO

Beth Chatto (here, late 1970s) and her innovative use of plants were inspirations to John Brookes.



JOHN BROOKES

John Brookes' first Chelsea show garden (above) in 1961, and his competition-winning plan for it (above right).



interest was a garden by Wallace & Barr of Tunbridge Wells in the 1950s, designed by their employee Anthony Pasley, in which a diagonal design was interspersed with fountains playing in concrete bowls in a small garden layout. It was an excitingly modern domestic concept at the time – and beautifully planted as well.

In the big, tented marquee at Chelsea I remember seeing amazing arrangements of plants, year after year, by Beth Chatto from 1976 onwards. These made me realise, after reading about it for so long, what planting design was all about. There is more to it than just colour: it is all about scale, texture and form – and yes, colour as well – though not just for the few days of Chelsea, but for the whole year round.

Constructional design and planting design were



RHS LINDLEY LIBRARY

Rock was an element popular in show gardens even in the 1960s, although this fashion has nearly died out.

coming together in my mind. Where else, apart from Chelsea, could one experience small-garden layouts? At this time only grand gardens were open to visitors. And the designed small space was a new phenomenon.

## Building a garden

My next challenge was to actually build a garden. The Institute of Landscape Architects, of which I was a student member, held a competition for a garden at Chelsea in 1961. Wow, I won it.

The competition was sponsored by the Cement and Concrete Association, so this comparatively little-used material needed to be included in the design. The public was generally hostile to concrete at that time (it had a wartime defence connotation, I think). So this was a challenge. My planting was mainly of *Rhododendron ponticum*, from which I removed many of the flowers, and the remaining greenery provided the setting for the structure. But the show is about plants and growing >>>

## ❁ Garden design fashions

them, and this exhibit caused a bit of a flurry. The experience of working at RHS Chelsea Flower Show was exciting, however – not only seeing my plan come alive, but everyone else's as well.

In those early days, sponsorship monies available for constructing a garden were only a fraction of what is now lavished upon them. I went on to design and build gardens for the *Financial Times* – a town, suburban and a country garden in 1971–73 – and for the Inchbald School of Garden Design in the mid-1970s a Jekyll garden, a Middle Eastern garden and, I believe, the first vegetable garden (pictured below right).

The firm of Gavin Jones built most of my gardens – I recall dear old Mrs Gavin laboriously picking through my plantings to remove every dead leaf, and presenting an immaculate layout to the judges.

Each of my gardens needed a different styling in their layout, and required a choice of materials. But, most of all, the styling was in the planting. The use of plants has been the aspect of the show gardens, along with their increasing popularity, that has most changed over the years.

### Going wild

Those early 'Surrey gardens' were essentially spring-like and shrubby; shrub roses became popular, which then gave way to the greater use of perennials, later stabilised with box balls of varying sizes. Then grasses came along (a Continental idea), and these suffused perennial plantings to create a semi-wild, looser look. It was only in the 1980s that the 'wild look' really took over, with an eco-sensibility pervading even the RHS. I bought into this vogue myself, but found that many of our native plants are too invasive for small gardens.



RHS / NEIL HEPWORTH

John Brookes appreciates the influence of garden designers from overseas. Ulf Nordfjell, from Sweden, brought a Nordic colour scheme to his 2009 garden (above). His pavilion was remarkably similar to that in John's 1961 garden (see p19).



JOHN BROOKES

So the aspiration of the garden had now become not only a fine-weather place for family use, but a mini sanctuary for wildlife as well. However, this is truly at odds with the latest passion for growing your own herbs and vegetables – and so it goes on. The way we think about and use our gardens reflects not only our status, but more importantly the way in which society is thinking, and what about.

### Media influences

Television coverage has made a huge difference to the standard of garden design. Some of the garden makeover programmes have been truly awful, but the blanket coverage of RHS Chelsea Flower Show is excellent and has allowed its lessons to be seen by an enormous public. Sometimes I would like to see more analysis of the gardens' layout and content, with perhaps a little less chat. I would love to see a plan of what it is that I am looking at, for instance.

Above all, it is so important for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show to demonstrate the work of garden and landscape designers from overseas, as well as from the UK. This helps us to see the potential of a different way forward.

I would congratulate the RHS on the centenary of its world-renowned show, and enthusiastically applaud its continuing support of garden design.❁

Part of the author's exhibit for the Inchbald School of Garden Design (above). Exhibited at the 1975 show, he wonders if it is perhaps the earliest instance of including vegetables in smaller gardens.



RHS / JANE SABIRE

Christopher Bradley-Hole used crown-lifted bamboo as a canopy for perennials and yew hedges in his 2005 design.