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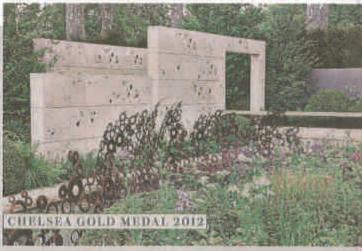


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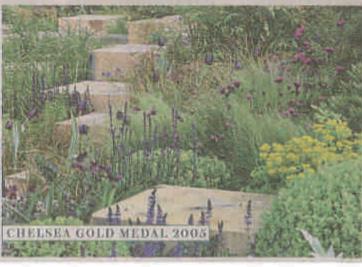
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ARDHING









The secrets of a Chelsea winner

Andy Sturgeon has won six RHS gold medals at the Chelsea Flower Show. Here, he reveals his inspirations for this year's Telegraph showpiece

he four years since my previous show garden at Chelsea have passed swiftly. And as May hurtles towards us, I wonder why I have stuck my head above the paramet spain.

parapet again.

The truth is that, deep down, I love the drama, the excitement and the jeopardy. I get a kick out of it. It's a drug. What's more, I owe my career to the Chelsea Flower Show so there are commercial incentives. to

are commercial incentives, too.

This will be the eighth time I have put myself through this ordeal since 2001 and it doesn't get any easier. In fact, the pressure I put myself under increases. In theory, I know how to win a gold medal, but I'm not the sort of person to go through the motions.

Worse still, I appear to enjoy making life difficult for myself and I'm never totally happy wallowing in my comfort zone, Chelsea, after all, is an adventure, and adventures are



Award-winning: Andy Sturgeon's gardens are renowned for their sculptural characteristics and innovative planting

meant to be exciting, even dangerous. So, as I sat down at my kitchen table one Sunday night last autumn, I did not do the sensible thing and draw a slick, contemporary "London" garden to pull in commissions from well-heeled clients and cement my career. Instead, I began modelling a garden that was a bit different, risky even. I wanted to push boundaries and flex my design muscles.

flex my design muscles.

My starting point was a childbood memory. I vividly recall entering the cavernous halfs of the Natural History Museum as a boy of no more than ten and feeling shivers run down my spine. As I stood in that cathedral of knowledge and gazed at the magnificent Diplodocus skeleton, I received a profound lesson in scale, time, theatre, architecture, history and nature. I remember how tiny and insignificant I felt.

Of course, I've been back many times, first as a child and more recently with my own three boys – and, on each occasion, I am awestruck. It is

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Vision: Andy Sturgeon's design for this year's Chelsea garden (in CGI form, left) recalls the spine of a Stegosaurus, below

We're all part of this adventure and it is not without risks

cardboard to represent a mountain range running through the garden, I arranged them to define the space and they seemed to take the form of the bony plates on the spine of a Stegosaurus. When I was finished, there were I7 "mountains" or "bony plates" in all, which, I discovered, is about the average for one of those handsome chaps

Fundamentally, I was making a simple connection between colossal geological events that shape our planet, vast timescales and man's relatively fleeting and insignificant





time on Earth. The usual analogy is that if 3.8 billion years of Earth's history are represented by a single day, then the dinosaurs arrived at about 11pm and us humans didn't pitch up until a minute before midnight, which rather puts things in perspective.

Bronze seemed the obvious choice for the mountains/Stegosaurus plates—I like the ambiguity—as it represents a period in time.
There is also a happy coincidence that the fossil-rich limestone I am using as paving was laid down in the late Jurassic period, which is when the Stegosaurus roamed the Earth. Everything appeared to fit together.

Over the years, I have developed a style that is significantly sculptural. The form of that sculpture defines the spaces and the character of the garden, Inspired: clockwise, from top left, Andy Sturgeon has been inspired by the South Downs, South America and the jungles of Borneo

and this year is no exception.

And then, of course, there are plants. Lots of them. In the past few years, I have worked on gardens all across the Mediterranean, from Portugal to Italy and Turkey. I've bought plants from nurseries in Spain, the south of France and Tuscany, and I have fullen in love with Italy in general. I'm fascinated by the natural plant communities I see. I'm interested in the way they grow together, the way they colonise impromising ground, how they prosper and how they struggle.

By visiting a project regularly wherever it is in the world, I get to see the same place during different seasons. I notice the seasonal changes in plants that are perhaps unfamiliar and learn to identify the local adaptations for drought or salt-laden winds. It then becomes easier to



andy Sturgeon has won RHS gold medals at Chelsea Flower Show in 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010 (for The Telegraph, when he was also awarded Best in Show) and 2012. He has won gold awards in Singapore and Philadelphia, and three awards from the UK's Society of Garden Designers in 2014. Sturgeon mixes traditional materials with contemporary styling. His gardens are known for their sculptural characteristics and innovative planting See andy sturgeon.com for details

recognise the same modifications in plant communities in different continents and hemispheres,

I spot connections between plants in the Mediterranean and those on the Black Sea on the Crimean Peninsula and further afield in South America, New Zealand and California.

It is, I realise, amateur botany, but I firmly believe these observations of plants in their natural habitats can inform and influence plant selection in a garden - regardless of the climate you are working in. A Yorkshire hedgerow or a Berkshire roadside are equally as informative as a scree slope in Sarajevo or a hillside in China.

If you put plants together that are adapted to the same sort of conditions, they will always look right and thrive together – even if they are from opposite sides of the globe.

This year I've picked plants from all these places and more. Crocus, the nursery that is growing all my plants, would normally gather them up from around the UK and northern Europe.

This year I have dragged Crocms, willingly I hope, out of its comfort zone. Peter Clay, its co-director, and I have been shopping in the south of France, Italy and Spain. Bather than sending everything back home to spend the winter shivering in Surrey, all the plants are growing trather faster than we would like in sunny Almeria. We are all, of course, slightly worried. But this is an experiment, we are all part of this adventure and it is not without risks.