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## Andy Sturgeon: 'I didn't plan on returning to Chelsea Flower Show – but now I have the chance to leave a legacy'

The star designer is returning to the great spring show one last time for a cause close to his heart

By Boudicca Fox-Leonard

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Year after [Chelsea Flower Show](#) year, Andy Sturgeon has hidden himself among the dense crowd on opening day and listened to what show-goers have to say about his latest garden.

Whether they love it or hate it isn't what matters to him, but the very fact they're talking about it. "It means you've nailed it," says the 56-year-old garden designer.

And an open conversation is precisely what he hopes to excite this year with his design for mental health charity [Mind](#).

Sturgeon pulls out the stops every time he designs a garden at Chelsea: there have been 10 in total, the first in 2001. He's won an impressive eight medals, including the highest accolade of "Best Show Garden" three times – in 2010 and 2016 for *The Telegraph*. He's built a career designing private and public gardens around the world, working in Asia as well as projects closer to home for Battersea Power Station, a roof garden for Great Ormond Street Hospital, and [Horatio's Garden](#) for a spinal unit in Belfast.

At Chelsea he's known for taking risks. Bold architecture and Mediterranean planting; no country cottage with roses for him. This year will be his last ever chance. His final Chelsea.

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"It's a funny one. In many ways I owe my career to this, but I think my time is probably done. I don't know what more I can get out of it," he says candidly.

Having gone into gardening to plant trees, doing so in order for them to be dug up at the end of the show no longer interests him.

He only agreed to come back this year because his design for Mind will afterwards be uprooted and transported in its entirety to Barrow-in-Furness, where it will be allowed to

grow and flourish.

Such a second life is now increasingly common for a Chelsea garden, which in the past have ended up scattered to the four winds in different resting places. Still, when he was first asked by sponsor [Project Giving Back](#) if he would design another garden for Chelsea his answer was a simple and decisive “no”.

So they tempted him: What if he could choose the charity himself? “I don’t think they ever let you choose,” says Sturgeon. “I’ve never got to, anyway.” So he did.

Mind was a no-brainer. His late partner, Sarah Didinal, who died suddenly of heart failure in 2009, had been a supporter of the charity and Sturgeon’s studio has raised money for Mind over the years.

There was a [green awakening during the pandemic](#) as the [nation sought sanctuary in their outdoor spaces](#), but the mental health benefits of gardening are well known to Sturgeon and his colleagues in the industry. “That’s why you get into it, so I think we all feel, ‘Oh thank God everyone finally caught up!’”

While work “fell off a cliff” for the first three months of the pandemic, as soon as people realised the importance of their own gardens, Sturgeon was busier than ever.

However, while he got to work outside, visiting clients and walking around gardens, it wasn’t the case for everyone in his studio.

“I was aware of the imbalance of what I was doing and other people who work for me. There were lots of Zoom meetings with people perched on the ends of beds. That brought [the impact of the lockdowns on mental health](#) into sharp focus, too.”





'A place to sit, share and listen': Sturgeon wants the Mind garden to be a sanctuary | CREDIT: Andy Sturgeon

Sturgeon's family – his three sons Luke, 22, Cameron, 19, and Tom, 17, and his partner, landscape architect Thea Thompson, and her 13-year-old daughter – walked the South Downs every day. “That was our therapy and what kept us sane.”

He was surprised by how the different age groups were affected. Luke, at university, saw his whole experience destroyed and it still hasn't really returned to normal. Cameron had the chaos of trying to sit A-levels. Thea's daughter was probably the least affected, thanks in part to a school friend living a few doors down from their home in Brighton.

Their own garden is small, an error he made when he bought the house, assuming that he would always be gardening because of his job anyway. “Now I want a bigger garden.”

However, Sturgeon knows the value of gardening as a meditative activity. After Sarah died, he says: “I used to just go and stand in the garden. I had a bigger garden then.”

The blurb for his Mind garden describes it as “a sanctuary, a place to sit, share and listen”. There will be meadow-like spaces as well as calming birch trees. Today, standing in his half-constructed plot, you would have to be a zen Buddhist master to find equanimity here. Diggers hum around us and Sturgeon is briefly called away from our chat to give the final word on the angle of a beautiful three-trunked silver birch that is being lowered into the ground.

He's good at finding quiet moments, though – one year he had a secret chair in his plot so he could enjoy it without show-goers seeing him. This garden though is about openness. There will be no hidden corners.

His team is busy putting the texture on his curved brick walls. To me they look like the folds of our brain: for him the walls are having a conversation with each other. There's a sylvan quality to the trees, blending into the taller canopy of the plane trees that line the grounds.

Barrow was chosen as the site for the onward life of this garden because of how it will work in the space available there. Dunelm is helping to pay for the logistics of transporting it.

“That legacy is really important to me. To put all this effort in and not chuck the design in the bin. To actually use it for the benefit of many.

“The charity will use it for therapy and functions, and these trees will be seen by the wider neighbourhood.”



'There's a lot of scope for people not to like it': not one for playing it safe, Sturgeon's design is typically architecturally bold  
| CREDIT: Clara Molden

Few from Barrow will have been to Chelsea. The show, says Sturgeon, is “a fairly elitist thing”, but it’s also a familiar environment for him. As is the pre-show buzz of activity.

While much of the hard landscaping is easy to implement, the planting is the unknown. “As we stand here right now I don’t really know what the planting is going to look like. You can have an idea but if some [plants] have already flowered or died, then you have to readjust your sights and roll with it.”

Making light of the process, he says: “It can mean substituting one fluffy yellow thing for another equally fluffy yellow thing. You have to be quite nimble, but I like the adrenaline that comes with the jeopardy!”



Given the painstaking detail he goes to, does he still care about winning medals?

“Unfortunately yes, you do still want to win them.

“There’s no point doing this if you’re going to be happy with silver, that literally means you’ve not done it as well as you should have done. You’ve let yourself and the team down.”

With so many medals already to his name, he must know the winning formula? “I do, but I don’t necessarily apply it. I’ve always taken risks. And I have with this garden.”

Sturgeon’s style is glamorous. Mental health is not. “That was almost the reason for choosing it,” he says, to get people talking. It is also typically architecturally bold. “There’s a lot of scope for people not to like it.”

Playing it safe, however, would be anathema to him. Square-cut paving that he knows would fit the plot; or doing something he’d tried and tested before. “From a design point of view, if I wasn’t pushing it, I wouldn’t really be interested in doing it.”

What the public loves, however, he says, never changes. “They love traditional pastiche, country-stone cottages with a little stream, which is kind of a shame for me, and I’ll never win People’s Choice.”



Restful, woodland plants and small trickling pools soften the rendered walls | CREDIT: Clara Molden

He's spent his career trying to do something new, rather than reinvent the Arts and Crafts garden. "I love it too, and there's a reason Hidcote is the most visited garden in the country. The rose is also routinely voted the nation's favourite flower, but it's not my thing."

He worries that design is slipping from being Chelsea's focus. Where once the same plants came back year after year ("the same rhododendrons and Japanese maples"), in the past two decades Chelsea has found its design credibility. "It would be a shame if it let that slide away," he says.

There have been a few lean years in terms of the number of gardens, he thinks – although he hopes that the involvement of the major new sponsor Project Giving Back, spending £10 million over three years, will help Chelsea retain its vitality.

Sometimes, he fears, the message of sponsors or a political point that a designer is trying to champion becomes the focus rather than pure design.

While he's excited about fellow gold-medal winner [Sarah Eberle](#) also being at Chelsea this year, he says many of his contemporaries feel the same way he does: a little bit "been there and done that".

"There are young people coming through who need to take over. There's been a problem in the past that sponsors haven't wanted to take a risk with a designer who doesn't have a proven track record."

That's been brilliant for him, because he keeps getting commissioned, but not so wonderful for the life blood of the industry.

"It's not necessarily about age, but new designers with fresh ideas. They're out there, they just need a chance." Just as he was given his first garden plot after hammering on a lot of doors to get a slot in one of the RHS's shows.

I try to catch Sturgeon out. Will he come back if he wins this year? No. Next spring he wants to watch the bluebells emerge and rejoice in the beauty of the flowers, rather than triggering show anxiety.

"You see something flowering and you say, 'Oh my God, I wish I'd grown that for my garden.'

"It sucks quite a bit of time out of your being. Even now I'm worried about the minutiae in a way you wouldn't if it was a real project. You'd make a decision and live with it."

*[Click here for Tim Richardson's round-up of all the show gardens](#)*



## The top 10 most eye-catching plants in the Mind Garden



Top left to top right: yellow asphodel, opium poppy and spreading bellflower. Bottom left to right: false Solomon's seal, striped hemlock and horned spurge | CREDIT: Clara Molden

### Yellow asphodel

A clump-forming perennial, *Asphodelus lutea* has narrow leaves and fragrant bright yellow flowers in dense racemes in late spring.

### Opium poppy

This 35in tall rich purple poppy (*Papaver somniferum* 'Lauren's Grape'), has grey-green foliage and makes a good cut flower.

### Spreading bellflower

A wiry, delicate biennial of European meadows, woodlands and verges, *Campanula patula* can reach 18in tall.

### False Solomon's seal

The red curving stems of *Maianthemum oleraceum* hold heads of white flowers. A shade-lover, it is often mistaken for Solomon's seal.

### Striped hemlock

*Molopospermum peloponnesiacum* has decorative, shiny, fern-like foliage and lots of spring flowers; from central Europe.

## Horned spurge

A handsome spreading plant, *Euphorbia conigera* (syn. *E. wallichii*) is perfect for brightening a shady spot with its lime green flowers.



From top left, clockwise, to bottom left: dahurian angelica, bupleurum, Californian poppy and redleaf rose | CREDIT: Clara Molden

## Dahurian angelica

A native of Russia, China and further east, *Angelica dahurica* is traditionally prized for the medicinal properties of its roots.

## Bupleurum

A subtle oddity of a plant with its pincushions of flowers, *Bupleurum aureum* is used in traditional remedies for liver infections.

## Californian poppy

A beautiful annual, *Eschscholzia californica* 'Ivory Castle' has blue-grey feathery foliage and bears cream flowers in profusion.

## Redleaf rose



Native to the mountains of central Europe, *Rosa glauca* has glaucous foliage and bears beautiful single flowers followed by red hips.

## Which exhibit are you most looking forward to at Chelsea Flower Show 2022? Let us know in the comments section

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