



**MARTYN COX**

In the Garden

**B**efore thousands of keen gardeners surge through the gates of the Chelsea Flower Show at 8am on Tuesday, one of the world's most sought-after garden designers will be chewing his fingernails.

After spending months working on a show garden for Laurent-Perrier, Tom Stuart-Smith will be hoping that his creation has bagged a coveted Royal Horticultural Society gold medal.

'I'd be really upset if the judges gave it a bronze, silver or silver-gilt medal because I've never won anything but gold,' says Tom, 50, one of the most successful designers in Chelsea's 87-year history.

Since making his debut at the show, he has won seven golds - his first was in 1998 with a garden for fashion house Chanel. Tom has also landed the prestigious Best in Show Award three times.

Given such an impressive record, you would expect Tom's own garden to be pretty special. Fortunately his four-acre plot at Bedmond, Hertfordshire, lives up to its billing.

Surrounding a converted 17th Century barn which he shares with his wife Sue, 49, daughter Rose, 22, and sons Ben, 20, and Harry, 17, the garden is divided into different areas by neatly clipped hedging. You will also find a Mediterranean-style courtyard, verdant lawns, a woodland garden and herbaceous perennials in beds and in borders.

Beyond the main garden is a wilder area that merges seamlessly into the surrounding landscape. Enjoying great views over rolling countryside, it includes a wildflower meadow studded with cowslips and Narcissus 'Pheasant's Eye', a late-flowering daffodil.

The property has been completely transformed since Tom and Sue took it over in 1986. 'The house was derelict and on the verge of falling down. It was set within a 50-acre wheat field with no garden - the only plant was a dying elder tree,' recalls Tom, who has been a landscape architect for 27 years. His works include the Queen's Jubilee Garden at Windsor Castle, the vast landscape around the bicentennial glasshouse at RHS Wisley, and the breathtaking Italianate parterre at Trentham Gardens, Staffordshire.

'Our garden developed slowly,' he says. 'To begin with we had a 10ft strip of grass around the barn that the kids used to play on. Pockets of land were added whenever we had any money to spare.' The garden is now so large that Tom employs a full-time gardener to look after it.

Beyond the paved terrace is a 120ft rectangular area split into



**GROWING FOR GOLD:** Tom, who hopes to secure his eighth medal at Chelsea, and part of his garden in Hertfordshire

# A training ground for my Chelsea stars of the future

## This year's showstoppers are...

The Chelsea Flower Show is renowned as a launch pad for new products and plants. Here's my pick for 2010:

● A vigorous Asiatic lily named after pop star **Lily Allen** is to be unveiled by grower HW Hyde & Son. It has large orange and black flowers and is perfect in a pot. Bulbs will be available from next spring. Pre-order at [www.hwhyde.co.uk](http://www.hwhyde.co.uk) or call 0118 934 0011.

● In honour of the Beatrix Potter Society's 30th anniversary comes **Rose 'Beatrix Potter'**, with highly perfumed, soft pink flowers carried on 4ft stems.



**PICK OF THE BUNCH:** 'Lily Allen', 'Beatrix Potter' and 'Sweet Clare'

Available at £15 from Peter Beales Roses (0845 4810277, [www.classicroses.co.uk](http://www.classicroses.co.uk)).

● If you want a shrub with scented flowers, **Philadelphus maculatas 'Sweet Clare'** is hard to beat. Growing to 3½ft, 'Sweet

Clare' has slender, arching stems and narrow silver-green leaves that act as a foil for masses of delicate, downward-facing white flowers with deep crimson centres. Launched by Hillier Nurseries ([www.hillier.co.uk](http://www.hillier.co.uk)), it costs £10.99.

three connected, yet contrasting spaces. The first consists of a wide grass path running down the centre with borders on either side backed by yew hedges. Dominated by white,

lilac and purple tulips in May, the borders billow with veronicastrum, cardoons and grasses in summer.

In the second space are three square beds surrounded by low

box hedging and columns of yew, underplanted with nepeta, lavender, kale and purple erysimum.

In the third area is a 60ft lawn partially enclosed by 10ft hornbeam

hedges. Nearby is a woodland garden where epimediums, asarum, symphytum and other shade-loving perennials thrive. From here, a grassy path snakes its way past large beds crammed with sedum, euphorbia and hundreds of other desirable plants, such as foxtail lilies (*Eremurus 'Joanna'*).

So does his plot provide inspiration for the Chelsea show gardens? 'Not in a design sense, but I might decide to use a certain plant because it does well here. For example, *Cenolophium denudatum*, is exactly the kind of plant I like so I'm including it this year,' Tom says.

While Tom is keeping his fingers crossed that he will bag another gold medal, he has already decided to miss next year's show.

'Designing a show garden is all-consuming. I've already made a pact with the family - I don't think they'd forgive me if I changed my mind,' he says.

● Tickets for the Chelsea Flower Show have sold out, but coverage starts tonight on BBC1.

## Bypass is ruining our lives but no one seems to care

My house backs on to the Westhoughton bypass, near Bolton. When it was built 20 years ago, trees were planted as a screen but they are inadequate against today's traffic levels. The road is elevated above my garden wall and is making life, despite double-glazing, uncomfortable. The council is unsympathetic and local MPs have proved ineffectual.

Your council is not interested because the road in question is



**HOME TRUTHS**

Ross Clark answers readers' queries

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a trunk road and so belongs to the Highways Agency ([www.highways.gov.uk](http://www.highways.gov.uk)) to which you should direct your complaints.

There are two possible approaches: you could press for noise barriers or you could ask that when the road is resurfaced, it is done with porous asphalt which, as well as helping any drainage problems, is a lot quieter than ordinary asphalt.

### HOW DO I PROTECT MY HOME AFTER I'M DEAD?

My neighbourhood has been affected by landlords buying up houses and splitting them into bedsits. I feel so strongly about

this that I want to place a restrictive covenant on my semi-detached house to ensure that after my death it can be purchased only for owner-occupation and cannot be sold to the owner of the adjoining property. Are there any downsides to this, and can the covenant be overridden?

While your desire to preserve your neighbourhood is understandable, homeowners cannot dictate how their

properties can and cannot be used for ever. For a covenant to be enforced, there must be a living person or organisation capable of doing so - someone who has an interest in property locally. You could try to vest a covenant in a local civic society or preservation society but even then you cannot guarantee that the covenant would be enforceable. Covenants are the bane of developers' lives but they have become rather expert at finding a way round them.