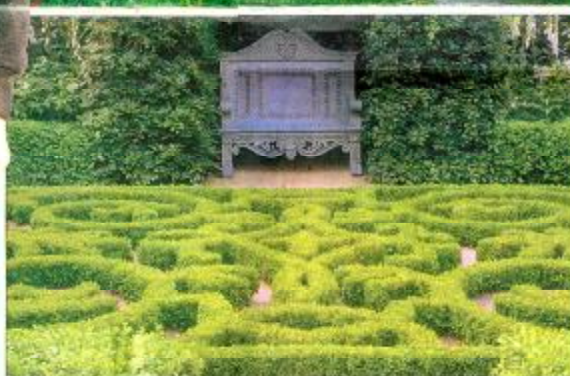


Showman supreme: Tom Stuart-Smith, left, has enjoyed unprecedented success at Chelsea Flower Show. His gold medal-winning gardens include the Laurent-Perrier/Harpers & Dowson garden, above left, which won Best in Show in 2003; the 2000 box maze, *Homage to Le Nôtre*, top right; 2001's contemporary garden, left; the arbour of weeping hornbeams and statue of Hygeia from Trentham Awaakes, 2005, below; and a detail from 1998's *Le Bosquet de Chanel*, below left



NO SLEEP TILL CHELSEA

Tom Stuart-Smith has radical plans for this year's *Daily Telegraph* garden. He gives **Cassandra Jardine** an exclusive preview

These neat rows of rectangles, each barely the size of a tennis court, are hardly an inspiring setting for a garden designer. There's no house to reflect, no landscape with which to play, no history to incorporate. Yet this is what Chelsea Flower Show provides, and every year our top designers have to conjure up magic on these blank patches.

And every time he has tried, Tom Stuart-Smith has pulled it off. He has an unbroken record of five gold medals including, in 2003, the award for Best in Show. So far he has created a 17th-century box labyrinth, a baroque 18th-century bosquet, a contemporary garden, a wild prairie planting and a reworked Italianate

terrace inspired by his redesign of Trentham in Staffordshire. This year, as the designer of *The Daily Telegraph* garden, he is going in another direction with an unexpected theme – rust.

Since Chelsea takes place in May, designers usually use the vivid greens and bright blooms of late spring, but this year Stuart-Smith is trying out dark red and orange flowers that blend with oxidising metal.

"There's no point in doing Chelsea unless you are doing something with a certain amount of risk involved," he says, producing colour images of the garden that is taking shape in his mind.

Along one side will be rusty planters made of weathered Corten steel, a material Stuart-Smith has

been using at a house near the sea in Norfolk. They will contain water with "something subtle" happening in it. A row of leggy bushes – viburnums, he says, producing a picture of heavy green leaves – will add height; underneath he will plant thousands of bearded irises. Elsewhere will be mounds of box, which he has been using in Norfolk to simulate the patterns of detritus left on the beach.

Stuart-Smith's approach is an intellectual one: "The underlying meaning is important; a garden that's just attractive can seem vacuous," he says. One of his themes this year will be the postmodernist idea that everyone can experience the same shapes and forms in their own way. Although the space is small, there are

four different entry points and a variety of exploration routes. Stuart-Smith abhors the "prescriptive" approach of fixed viewpoints and focuses, he says, and then apologises for slipping into "pretentious mode".

There is a touch of the professional about Stuart-Smith, the violin-playing, Cambridge-educated zoologist son of a high-court judge who produces exquisite perspective pencil drawings of his designs. At 6ft 4in, he could appear to look down on the world from a lofty height, so he downplays that impression by adopting a chatty tone and sprinkling his conversation with swear words. But what really saves him from

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'You must entertain'

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seeming alarmingly cerebral is that he plainly loves getting down to earth, being scratched by brambles, playing with plants as well as ideas.

He installs every last bit of bedding himself and, having just put thousands of plants in a client's garden, he has a bad back. The suggestion that he could delegate such toil shocks him. "Would a novelist ask someone else to write his words?" he asks. For him, both the fun and the quality of the end product comes from the exact choice of plant, according to height and shape. He starts planning for Chelsea a year in advance, giving the plants he has ordered time to develop character.

"Some designers are still doing their hard landscaping right up to the wire," says Mark Fane of Crocus, which each year supplies the plants and builds the gardens with Stuart-Smith. "Tom's golden rule is that the structure has to be complete a week before judging so he has six clear days for planting."

Insisting on doing it all himself isn't just bad for his back, it also puts a strain on family life. "During Chelsea, for me it's important to maintain a feverish tempo," he says. "I start early and end

late. I don't like being distracted by phone calls or conversation, so my wife, Sue, knows better than to ring me."

In recent years Sue has taken time off her work as a doctor to help him on the final days at Chelsea. His three teenage children used not to see their father for the duration, but they are now old enough to come down from the family home in Northamptonshire to admire his handiwork. If he is drained afterwards, he does not regret it: "If a designer doesn't have over-busy Aprils and Mays there are going to be dull Septembers."

Aged 46, Stuart-Smith has done enough Chelseas for the rhythm to have become natural. His first "bleeding" in the intense race leading up to the judging came when he worked on show gardens for the designer Elizabeth Banks before going it alone. But gardens have always been a part of his life.

The fourth of six children, he had what he calls a feral upbringing, running wild but also playing chamber music with his family. His mother ran a market garden in Hertfordshire and he used to help his father cut down trees in the woods around their home. Several of his siblings have become artists of various sorts – musicians, designers – but Tom was set on becoming a scientist until work for his finals involved him visiting the botanical gardens in Cambridge every



Stuart-Smith: a combination of plantsmanship and originality

day to study moorhens. Finding the flora more entrancing than the fauna, he sought out those grand old men of garden design, Lanning Roper and Geoffrey Jellicoe. Their passion confirmed his desire to take up gardening as a career.

What sets Stuart-Smith apart from other designers is his rare combination of plantsmanship, eye for the grand design and originality. At Windsor Castle he lined a road with bushes shaped like bushies. For a private client he constructed a terrace that copied the cell patterns in the leaves of a nearby tree. At Trentham, the garden he has restored outside Stoke, he overlaid a map of the Trent on the garden and marked the course of the river in grasses that run across the flowerbeds in winter.

"I like to use abstract patterns as evocations of that which you cannot see," he says. "But the most important thing is whether it works as a

garden. You've got to entertain people."

After so much success at Chelsea it could be daunting to have yet another go, especially since he shares a Clerkenwell studio with Jinny

Biom, who is designing the next-door plot. "We won't be throwing primulas at one another over the hedge, even though we do have the same contractor," he claims.

Competition for Stuart-Smith comes not from other people but his own rigorous standards. "If I don't get another gold," he says, "I will have done something wrong, and that will be very disappointing." He is evidently doing everything he can to avoid this outcome.

Chelsea Flower Show runs from Tuesday May 23 to Saturday May 27; ticket information on 0870 906 3780 (members), 0870 906 3781 (non-members); or www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea/tickets.asp.