

Under the greenwood tree

Tom Stuart-Smith's shady glade for this year's Chelsea Flower Show is garden design as nature intended, says Rosie Boycott

Tom Stuart-Smith, three times gold-medal winner at the Chelsea Flower Show, and designer, for the third time, of the Laurent-Perrier/*Harpers & Queen* Garden, has reverted to simpler themes for this year's event. Indeed, as he says, his designs have become progressively simpler since his very first outing at Chelsea, on behalf of Karl Lagerfeld and Chanel. It was such a complex vision that plants took second place to design – natural it certainly wasn't. Visiting him in his Hertfordshire home, it is easy to see why he is so much more comfortable with this year's garden, in which nature, with all its variety, strangeness and magic, takes precedence over angular shapes, gilded bronzes and man-made designs.

Although some 4,000 plants will go into this year's garden (to be built, once again, by online plant specialists Crocus.co.uk), including 10 *Cornus kousa* trees, each standing at about 15 feet high, the only additional materials Tom is using are Burlington slate rectangles ('like elongated Yorkie bars') – to make a wall and a terrace – and two wooden benches, set into the slate walls. A lily pool will be cut into the slate terrace,

echoed by a smooth recess cut into the slate wall, for holding a champagne bottle and two glasses. Far from looking divorced from the landscape, this minimalist sculptural element will have the textural richness and layered look of something discovered in the earth. Tom was partly inspired to use the slate in this way by the famously beautiful new Thermal Baths in Vals, for which architect Peter Zumthor used the local Valser quartzite to echo the rugged mountainside behind. From the wooden benches, one can reflect on the peacefulness of the garden: an oasis in the middle of the crush and mania of Britain's premier horticultural event.

Tom is reluctant to describe it as a woodland garden, preferring to refer to it as a 'shade garden'. 'Horticulturally, it is right to call it a woodland garden,' he says. 'But there aren't any frogs, or rotting logs, or winding paths or streams, so I feel I can't strictly describe it that way.' To my mind, though, it is a woodland garden, and one of the reasons I was so keen to meet him was that I have recently become the proud guardian of a wood (with a lovely house and garden attached), with which my husband and I have been wondering what to do.

At first, our wood was an albatross, a neglected jumble of closely packed trees, with nettles and



Clockwise from left:
Tellima grandiflora. Tom
Stuart-Smith in his
garden, on a chair he
designed. *Cornus
chinensis*. *Cornus kousa
var chinensis*. A sketch
of the Harpers &
Queen/Laurent-Perrier
garden designed by
Tom Stuart-Smith.
Aquilegia alpina
(Alpine columbine)



Clockwise from left:
selecting slate for the
Laurent-Perrier/Harpers &
Queen garden. Forest view.
Amsonia tabernaemontana.
Cornus kousa var chinensis.
The Thermal Baths in Vals,
designed by Peter Zumthor.
Convallaria majalis (lily of
the valley). *Geranium*
'Philippe Vapelle'

brambles reaching up to waist height. Ivy gripped the branches of the best and oldest oak, slowly throttling the great tree to death. Then we were lucky enough to meet David who, after putting the long-neglected and beautiful garden to rights, proposed we should start on the wood. Now, six months later, a massive tree-clearing effort has left behind healthy trees that have room to grow, and the surrounding ground, free from brambles and nettles, is ready for planting. Light streams in on the southern side, casting long shadows. It has the calm of a cathedral. Winding paths have been created through the trees, and areas set aside for benches and seats. The trees at the southern side now have fast-growing Kiftsgate roses snaking up their branches, along with honeysuckle and tough varieties of clematis. Allowing light in has magically

revived the *Mahonia japonicas* and, throughout the wood, snowdrops, bluebells and aconites were already emerging in February.

This rejuvenation of the wood has spurred us into action, so I was eager to discover Tom's selection of woodland plants. He has chosen phlox of varying muted colours (pale blues, whites, mauves and yellows), particularly avoiding bright colours such as reds, bright yellows or any oranges. I hazarded the idea that his colour scheme was 'pastel'; he winced. But he has chosen the plants deliberately to evoke a pale, northern temperate spring. Jacob's Ladder is another of his favourites, along with Solomon's Seal. He has also chosen a wide variety of geraniums: pale-mauve Lily Lovell, lilac *Phaenum album*, and milky-blue Philippe Vapelle. Hostas and irises in whites and blues will be there in profusion, as well as a delicate Japanese grass called *Hakonechloa macra*, which is a strong grower in all degrees of shade. We've been planting hellebores in our wood, but since they will be long over by Chelsea, Tom has gone for foxgloves, shade-loving peonies and hesperis.

The truth, as Tom acknowledged, is that, once established, a woodland garden is a great asset in a second home. You don't need to be in there, weeding away, every weekend, and there's certainly no mowing to do. Most second-home owners are looking for countryside peace and quiet, and, once it is up and running, this is something that a woodland hideaway will guarantee you.

Tom also lives near woods, though he doesn't, as yet, have a woodland garden. The Stuart-Smiths are a close family: Tom's mother and father live across the road; and one of his brothers, a QC, lives next door. 'I'm eternally grateful to my mother, who let me muck around in the garden from the age of six. I was always experimenting with this and that - often with disastrous results. Nowadays, when I've got time, I pop back across the road and put it right.'

Tom is one of those blessed human beings who knew, from an early age, exactly what he wanted to be, and who finds himself in the enviable position of being paid to do what he would willingly do for free. After reading zoology at Cambridge, he spent a year at Manchester studying landscape design. With his wife, Sue, a psychiatrist at the Tavistock Institute, and their three children, aged 10, 13 and 15, he now lives in a converted barn on the side of a narrow lane, opposite his parents. Within the wings of the L-shaped conversion, there is a formal garden, with colourful beds enclosed by box hedges; behind the house, herbaceous borders stretch away in ranks, giving way to open fields. 'I like the idea of a garden just winding its way out into the countryside,' he says. 'A garden should always

be the mediator between the house and the countryside. People who talk about gardens being "outside rooms" can take the concept a bit too far. It all then comes to an abrupt end - something I don't much like.'

When he is not working on designs for Chelsea, Tom plans and designs increasingly ambitious projects. He keeps a tight lip about the names of his clients (though his 2002 garden at Windsor Castle, commissioned by the royal household to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee, and the subject of a BBC film, is no secret), but he was happy to show me some current designs. In one, he has created border shapes using low *Ilex crenata* bushes, planted to mirror the veins on the leaves of woodland trees such as oak, ash and beech. It promises to be stunning. 'I don't use box any more,' he says. 'Ever since box blight took hold in this country, it's too risky. A whole hedge can be ruined in one short summer.'

Most of the plants he uses, and certainly all the trees, are bought abroad, from France or Germany. 'Take the Cornuses,' he says. 'If I wanted to buy them in the UK, I would probably be offered a choice of between 10 and 12 trees of that height and that age (about 10 to 12 years old). Instead, I jump on an easyJet flight at Stansted and, in just a few hours, I'm walking through fields of up to 100 trees. Even with the cost of moving them, there isn't much difference in the price, and the difference in quality is enormous.'

In the Laurent-Perrier/*Harpers & Queen* Chelsea garden, the trees, which will have been coaxed into early flower, will be at such a height that the visitor will be able to see the whole of the garden at once - no need to peer round complex corners to see what might be behind. He has been working on the design for the better part of a year, which has made life far easier this time around. With a laugh, he recalls the frantic panic that preceded Chelsea 2001, when he suddenly realised that he had ordered far too few grasses to fill the plot, and had to make do with an emergency purchase of plants that weren't as rich or luxurious as the others. He still walked away with a prized gold medal, so I can't believe that anyone else was any the wiser. But, like all people who are passionate about their craft, Tom is a perfectionist. Even within the 'organised chaos' of his woodland garden, there is a meticulous choreography of height, colour, light and shade, to move the eye around the garden in exactly the way he wants. 'Gardens are curious that way,' he says. 'They are often meant to look "informal and wild", but are, in fact, planned down to the last blade of grass.'

Of course, any garden at Chelsea has to cheat a bit - perhaps a lot. Flowers are forced into flower early, or held back in the cold

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to come to their peak at just the right moment. It is a festival about the wonder of plants at their very best, even if that moment happens to occur naturally a few weeks

earlier or later. And Tom says he doesn't mind when the garden is pulled down at the end of the show, believing that this is just part of the process. Personally, I would be heartbroken to see a year's work shovelled into the back of a lorry and carted back to the nurseries. But, if you are lucky enough to own a second home that includes an area of woodland, take a notebook, and study what he has planted. The resulting garden will be a source of pleasure for many years to come. □

All plants are available through Crocus.co.uk, either online or by ringing 0870 006 1057. Tickets for the Chelsea Flower Show 2003 are available from the Royal Horticultural Society (0870 906 3781).