

Show stoppers

Less naff sculpture, more clipped box - former winner Tom Stuart-Smith pinpoints this year's Chelsea trends

May is usually a whirl of damp compost, sleeping pills and parking tickets. In the week before the Chelsea Flower Show opens, garden exhibitors live on a diet of bacon butties, Mars bars and Coke. There are moments when you wonder why you're putting yourself through it all again. But I am not designing a show garden at Chelsea this year (19-23 May, rhs.org.uk/chelsea). For once, I can enjoy spring at home instead.

But what to look out for this time around? In these hard times for PR budgets, the numbers of show gardens are down from the low 20s in 2008 to the low teens. Two stand out. Luciano Giubbilei has designed a serene space composed of architectural masses of clipped box and hornbeam, where the flowery planting is modest and contained. This garden will be very polished: travertine, water and bronze. On the next-door plot, Ulf Nordfjell brings a clean, Scandinavian look to the show: stylised but ecologically informed planting juxtaposed with a glass and steel pavilion, and several layers of formality and semi-naturalism in between. I could never attempt such complexity in so small a space, but his enthralling garden at Chelsea two years ago showed he can carry this sort of thing off.

There is a good deal of other interest around, too. The Cancer Research Garden is designed by Robert Myers. As in previous years, the sponsor has given a specific brief that the garden must convey an aspect of its current campaign;

this year's theme is "impact". Myers, thankfully, has resisted any full-on symbolic colour assault, instead electing for a ball-like sculpture that generates circular ripples in a little pool which continue across the garden as a pattern of "waves" in the paving and planting.

Another one to look out for will be Nigel Dunnett's urban rain garden, showing what can be done with dry roofs and gardens. He is the expert on this, so anyone interested in green roofs and urban water conservation should take a look.

It is difficult to generalise about trends, but I am hoping that garden gimmickry will be shoved further into the bushes this year - the third-rate sculpture (a fine Chelsea tradition), the natty water feature and the twinkly, multicoloured lights improbably embedded in vast boulders of Chinese granite. As for planting, pleached and espaliered hornbeams are still in the frame, as are variations on the clipped box theme. Some of the time I think this is driven not only by what is available from the big European tree supermarkets but also by what looks good on a computer model. Garden design becomes like playing with Lego, with naturalism reduced to a little doormat of grasses. Of course, any good designer, including those mentioned above, goes beyond this kind of gardening-by-numbers to create an interplay and tension between artifice and nature.

This year I am judging the gardens, yet will be feeling just a bit envious of the designers. It may sound like one protracted stress-fest, but the enjoyment





Behind the scenic: Clipped box remains a dominant theme at Chelsea (left), where designers suffer a hectic week creating show gardens (above) - some using extreme measures to preen blooms (far left).

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of putting together a garden with a committed, skilled team outweighs any temporary loss of hair and sleep.

One near-disaster year for me was 2006. I made a garden for the Telegraph where the outer walls were pre-rusted Corten steel, which develops a wonderful, powdery patina of rust. These contrasted with neatly clipped hedges of hornbeam. The Corten was stored in the contractor's yard, and the night before delivery some kids broke in and used the walls as ramps for BMX bikes. There were indelible tyre marks everywhere. With one week to go until the opening, we had to sandblast every inch back to the bare metal and pray that it would rust in time (which it did). Then a fallow deer got into the nursery enclosure and grazed a line in the hornbeam hedge as neat as a laser. Again, with days to spare, we had to get more hedging delivered from Germany to fill the gaps.

Having survived those two traumas, we felt in the clear. Everything seemed set by Sunday

morning when we took up the protective sheeting to reveal the paving and oak boarding beneath. Half the timber had huge black stains, as though a bottle of ink had been thrown over it. Diagnosis was easy enough - rust from the wall had somehow got under the protective matting and reacted with the tannins in the oak. Treatment was not so easy. But, to his eternal credit - and this is the spirit of Chelsea - Andy Sturgeon, on the next-door garden, happened to have a gallon of oxalic acid knocking about (as one does) and magnanimously gave me all I needed. Oxalic acid is the only remedy for this problem, and the black faded away. Twenty-four hours later, the garden won best in show.

Next week: Carol Klein celebrates the delights of her garden in May

GARDENING BLOG



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