



THE CHELSEA GOLDS

Darryl Moore assesses the Gold medal-winning Show Gardens at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show

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In an attempt to leave behind the disputatious debate about judging at last year's show, the RHS made the most of a chance to freshen things up this year, with an influx of debutante designers creating Show Gardens. While the main consequence of this was a predictable media feeding frenzy over the new blood on offer, the show did exhibit a distinctly contemporary feel and general consistency which has been lacking in recent years. There was a notable reduction of themed or metaphorical gardens, which tend to shoehorn a sponsor's message into the design, with mission creep compromising integrity. Instead the focus was clearly on the gardens themselves, and the variety and quality of design on offer.

But despite the shock of the new, it was unsurprisingly the veterans who

dominated the show's top awards, flexing their creative muscle with a considered degree of confidence and taking four of the six Gold medals allocated in the Show Gardens category. Prior experience at the show obviously affords an awareness of the theatrical impact needed for show gardens, to engage an audience who are experiencing them at a distance from two sides, as opposed to inhabiting them. Also an understanding of the judging process is clearly important. Appreciating how the garden is pitted against the original brief and evaluated for clarity of vision and excellence in execution, in terms of originality, spatial awareness, plant associations, material selection and quality of construction, is something which ultimately pays dividends.

The coveted 'Best in Show' accolade eluded Luciano Giubbilei on his two previous showings in 2009 and 2011, but he was justly rewarded this year with his garden for Champagne Laurent-Perrier. Developing his trademark minimal style, the design revealed a further step in the direction of displaced symmetry, utilising six offset rectangles, to subvert familiarity with a subtle sense of intrigue. Water emerged from circular pools at diagonal corners of the plot, feeding rills running into a central pool. Two multi-stemmed *Amelanchiers* created a dialogue across the garden with each other and a cedar sculpture by Ursula von Rydingsvard. The large glossy leaves of clipped *Fagus* domes provided a structural offset to two blocks of pastel shaded planting, featuring→



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"THE FACT THAT FIVE OF THE GOLDS WENT TO SGD MEMBERS OR PRE-REGISTERED MEMBERS HIGHLIGHTS THE TALENT IN THE SOCIETY"



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a restricted palette including *Lupins*, *Digitalis* and *Irises*, interspersed with airy *Deschampsia*, *Brizia* and *Melica* grasses, all framed by a backdrop of yew hedging interrupted by two stone walls. Above all, the simple clarity of the garden embodied a dynamism which rewarded close attention. The gentle motion of the water and the play of light and shadow across the surfaces and walls created an enchantingly evocative space, delivered with a lightness of touch which gradually revealed a close attention to detail in every aspect of its finish.

Persian references

Previous top award winner Cleve West collected another Gold medal for his M&G garden, which could be considered the final part of a trilogy alongside his gardens from 2011 and 2012. Each have creatively combined classical and contemporary elements into a unique style, setting him apart from other designers strictly pursuing novelty or labouring with mannerism. Drawing upon the idea of gardens as a form of paradise, with a pan-historical multicultural lineage from ancient Persia to

contemporary British suburbia, the design featured a central space divided into quadrants according to Islamic design principles. A central obelisk fountain made of Bath stone and flowing into rills, created a focal point anchoring the garden, which despite the inherent amount of hard sculptural elements, appeared to hover on its corner plot with an air of effortless aplomb. Substantial informal planting of *Buxus* balls and larger leaved perennials such as *Acanthus*, *Centranthus* and *Euphorbia* enclosed the inner sanctuary, whilst a scattered mini xeriscape at the front provided a touch of light relief, alluding to harsh desert conditions the original Persian gardens provided respite from. Behind the fountain, a hand-etched limestone relief of the tree of life referenced eternity, whilst a formation of yew topiary at the rear provided a dark alcove, recalled Cleve's well head from 2012 and suggested infinity, in a nice conceptual play of time and space.

Traditional Italian style

Tomasso del Buono and Paul Gazerwitz's second appearance at the show offered

an immaculate conception; a crisp, contemporary take on traditional Italian style focused on simplicity, harmony and an acute sense of symmetry. They interpreted their design brief to the letter, realising it to a faultless degree. Columnar umbrella-shaped *Tillia* bookended a carpet-like lawn (something usually considered far too unfashionable to appear on Main Avenue), whilst flanking domed *Buxus* and *Phillyrea* supported a minimal cast of perennials including *Alchemilla*, *Anchusa*, *Euphorbia* and *Iris*. A hedge of Bay was a unique touch, and a water feature at the rear with a linear sequence of individual rivulets created a subtle effect against a weighty marble backdrop, providing an audio and visual focal point to a shaded seating area. The finish was fine-tuned to the extent of hyperreality, appearing almost artificial in its precision, and credit for its concise construction by Crocus (who also made Gubbelei's garden) should be duly noted. The Gold awarded by the judges was a fair reflection of a design which delivered on the high standards promised in its intention.





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No-nonsense design

Eschewing symmetry for a more naturalistic idiom, Adam Frost’s Homebase garden ‘Time to Reflect’, pulled on the same popularist heartstrings as his timely crowd-pleasing grow-your-own foray from last year. Using his self-professed no-nonsense design approach to fashion a family-centric space inspired by personal childhood reflections, the garden attempted to produce an arena of engagement with the innocence of nature. The geologically inspired hardscape contrasted form and texture in a rather over-scaled manner, offset by the styled ruralism of the massed drifts of *Irises*, *Geraniums* and *Digitalis*, reinforcing the dominant colour scheme throughout the show of purple, yellow and white. But a sense of over complexity hindered the readability of the detail of some of the key elements, especially some finer effects of the sinuous steam weaving its way through the site.

STREAM?

Even further from formality was the ‘No Man’s Land’ garden, marking Charlotte Rowe’s first appearance at Chelsea. In a bold move away from her recognisable clean contemporary stylings in favour of a conceptual approach, the garden presented a symbolic landscape commemorating the

centenary of WW1. Drawing inspiration from the terrain of the Somme, family memoirs, and artworks from the period, the design subdivided the plot into three distinct zones, each imbued with narrative significance. Impressive landforming at the rear featured a series of undulating mounds and a substantial hillock with an ascending gravel spiral path, a feature which was unfortunately not viewable to the average height viewer. Similarly whilst the Carla Scarpa-inspired composite concrete wall enclosing the site provided a fine contrasting backdrop for the trees and planting, it took several viewings to discover the recessed ‘trench’ it harboured at the front corner. But fine detail in the delicate weave of planting was quite unmissable in the area surrounding a large water basin, presenting an intricate mix of perennials, effecting a convincing slice of ordered wilderness. Hugo Bugg delivered on the promise of the new school of younger designers, with a design which managed to address the issues of water use and sustainability in a bold and idiosyncratic manner, investigating natural processes and SUDS systems in an urban environment. The angular language employed and the



layered level changes drew parallels with contemporary architects’ fascination with the non-orthogonal, whilst a keen attention to surface detail marked the garden out for its originality. A restricted material palette of concrete and Corten contrasted against peripheral perennial planting and a central ‘river’ of *Irises* providing a bold block of colour. By showcasing innovative responses to green infrastructure problems, executed to a high standard, the design proved a worthy recipient of a Gold medal, and reveals what may be seen as a generational shift, towards using design to solve wider landscape concerns in creative ways. But whether old school or new, it was high-quality design which truly defined Chelsea 2014, and the fact that five of the Show Garden Gold medals, as well as Silver-Gilt medals to Matthew Childs, Andrew Wilson and Gavin McWilliam, went to SGD members or pre-registered members, highlights the talents within the society. Hopefully the legacy of this year’s show will prove to be a prompt for raising the bar and pushing design in new and inspiring directions in the future. ○ *The Fresh and Artisan gardens will feature in our RHS Shows round-up in December’s GDJ.*