



Above: Bright blooms of Himalayan ginger, *Cautleya spicata*. Below: Shredded parasols of *Schefflera rhododendrifolia*



Top: The Himalayan-inspired Trailfinders Garden. Above: *Persicaria orientalis*, also known as 'kiss me by the gate'

# Chelsea as we have never seen it before

Kathryn Bradley-Hole presents our guide to the highlights of the most eagerly anticipated Chelsea Flower Show in decades

**W**HAT a difference 20 months make. For the first time in its 108-year history, the Chelsea Flower Show will be a September event, signing off the season, as it were, instead of ushering in the freshness of May.

After the necessary cancellations of spring 2020 and again in 2021, the RHS made the brave and interesting decision to host its most

prestigious show next week, still in the Royal Hospital grounds. This means there will be a few adjustments—and several new exhibitors. For some familiar nurseries and growers, the late season could not work with their ranges of plants; others have bowed out after a long and distinguished innings—notably, Hillier Nurseries has called time on its appearances, having exhibited for half a century.

But change is good and an autumn show is inevitably interesting. As it turns out, the four-month delay this year has been helpful, after one of the chilliest spring seasons on record. Despite its sunshine, the crucial month of April was the coldest for a century and many plants remained hunkered down, unable to unfurl new leaves and buds in a spring that for months continued to feel very much like winter. Notwithstanding modern glasshouse technology, a May show would have been somewhat lean this year.

Therefore, instead of the lovely pastels and English flowers of a typical Chelsea, expect to be plunged into the full-on, deep golds of rudbeckias and sunflowers, the marmalade hues of heleniums, the imperial purples and ocean blues of half-hardy salvias and muscular mounds of miscanthus grasses. There will be echinaceas, with starburst petals encircling a glowing-ember volcano of pollen and nectar, irresistible to bees and butterflies. Together with dahlias and gladioli, all of these popular plants are tricky things to get to Chelsea in

its normal season, but a September show sees them here in almost decadent abundance.

On rare occasions, a show may be seen as pivotal in retrospect, but we know this will be one such. We need to remember that many key exhibits, particularly the show gardens,

‘Expect to be plunged into the deep golds of rudbeckia’

were commissioned and designed two years ago, before the world's axis was shifted by the ongoing health crisis. What concerned us in 2019 may have been eclipsed since, by more pressing issues. Add to that element the exuberance and bounty that always invigorates September and this should be a zestful, opulent and uplifting show.

Travel and hospitality have been among the hardest hit of industries across 2020 and

2021 and, although the staycation has inevitably come of age, a number of exhibits give us welcome glimpses of 'abroad'. I like the serenity of the Finnish Soul Garden, a 'Nordic heritage seaside garden' by Taina Suonio, with its modern sauna cabin and watery surroundings.

The travel company Trailfinders takes us to the foothills of the Himalayas, with a lightly canopied woodland garden by Jonathan Snow showcasing the flora of Nepal. Featuring species such as *Cautleya spicata*, a Himalayan ginger; *Schefflera rhododendrifolia* with distinctive shredded parasols for foliage; and unruly *Persicaria orientalis*, known by Victorian gardeners as 'kiss-me-by-the-gate', growing among birches and hydrangeas, this garden will be a draw for plant connoisseurs. Quite a different Asian vibe is present in The Calm of Bangkok, a compact and pared-down, meditative space, with a hammock in a shade house, suggesting languorous hours amid the heat, humidity and tropical foliage. It is an alluring, quiet retreat for a bustling, 24-hour city. ➤