

House&Home

Chelsea is in full bloom

Exhibitors inside the RHS's world-famous show

match up to the level of the recent royal wedding

while outside gardens strive for the feelgood factor

Chelsea Flower Show has had a great week, culminating on Saturday when the sell-off of much on show begins at 4pm and continues until closing time at 5.30pm. The range and styling of exhibits in the Main Pavilion are consistently in a high class, keeping Chelsea at the top of the world's flower shows. Outside, visitors are spoiled for choice. There are small "artisans" gardens, big showpieces and masses of stands selling accessories, including artworks in glass and wiry sculptures which are not going to be let anywhere near my own gardens.

Outdoors two big gardens stand out from the rest, while a smaller one lights up a type of gardening which has gone unreported. The two best are M&G's "romanticised haven" or "imaginary oasis", depending on which bit of PR you read. Its tall lumps of rusty-red building-material do it no favours but its planting is very deftly chosen and executed. Sarah Price, its planner, was a designer for the 2012 London Olympics, but her approach here is quite different. The Olympic scheme drew on a massive back-up of replacement planting and came and went before anyone could bleat "legacy". The Chelsea garden uses plants for dry conditions and contrives a simple informality. Unusual poppies, euphorbias and, to my eye, silenes stop the scheme looking over-gardened among pomegranate trees, but the effect is not dull nor run-of-the-mill. This sort of pseudo-natural look is very

difficult to carry off and Price deserves great credit for the thought and skill which have brought it together.

The other success, a South African Wine Estate garden, is also strong on nostalgia. Jonathan Snow has designed for Trailfinders, the travel specialists, a garden with a sort of South African theme, backing on to a mock façade of a Cape Dutch homestead, painted a hard white and emblazoned with "1761". The winery in the scheme is a small line of vines on props in one section of the design, but the accompanying planting is excellent, showing arty red-hot pokers among some good euphorbias and then backing off to blue and white agapanthus and simple pillars of pink-white climbing roses, Pompon de Paris, I think, by the house façade. It is an unashamed pastiche, but it has style too. For years, South Africa has been misrepresented by stands of nothing but proteas and a few gerbera daisies and Birds of Paradise flowers in the main show pavilion. This garden and a superb indoor exhibit from Kirstenbosch National Botanical Garden remind us that proteas are only one small part of the South African story. Kirstenbosch is showing delightful freesias, also a South African asset.

On the opposite side of Main Avenue, the RHS is staging a Feel Good Garden. It is intended to give a foretaste of its bigger Health and Wellbeing Garden, due to open in 2020 at Wisley, the society's ever-increasing theme park. Its style is weedy-washy, no more



The M&G Garden designed by Sarah Price — Neil Hepworth/RHS

"natural" than a rose garden but billed as if a spineless muddle of cirsiums, hardy geraniums and yet more ornamental grasses will bring us into touch with mental calm and "wellness". A few black-flowered irises lift the tone but I fail to see why this sort of anaemic planting, masquerading as "ecological", will help me relax when I start getting amnesia or pains in the backside. I have left clear instructions to future carers to fly me straight off to Longwood Gardens in Pennsylvania and push me around in a cart through their gardens and conservatories where



Lemon Tree Trust Garden designed by Tom Massey — RHS/Neil Hepworth

truly ornamental planting, gardening at its best, uplifts the heart.

Outdoors I counted eight show gardens whose plants have been supplied by the same indefatigable source, the online crocus.co.uk. Bog-standard Iris sibirica and inevitable purple-flowered cirsium keep turning up, albeit on the edge of a pavilion full of the most varied and spectacular nursery displays in the world. The discrepancy is acute and here is my solution: the RHS should tell most of its exhibitors to co-operate for at least a year in advance with nurseries on its gold medal list from the previous two years. Designers of all levels would be invited to show exhibits simply called "My Nice (Bit of) Garden", whether in spring or summer. Bogus echoes of Yorkshire, Cornwall, waterwheels or



Robin Lane Fox

On gardens

gardens they try to realise in their own bits of ground.

Opposite Morgan Stanley's site, the Lemon Tree Trust strikes an important new note. Its smallish garden, designed by Tom Massey, is neat, and its exhibitors aim to highlight the place of gardening in the lives of refugees. The trust's private funders turn out to be linked to Hunt Oil, at home in Texas, but they have been touched by the arrival of refugees with seeds and bits of root from their homelands and their determination to make a garden even in temporary campsites, whether in northern Iraq or in Turkey. I enjoy the Texan energy and will to improve behind this well-aimed exhibit.

Indoors, the exhibits take the eye off

The top exhibitors' effects match up to the flowers for last Saturday's royal wedding

the lilac-coloured panelling of the pavilion and are a tribute to nurseries throughout Britain. Ashwood's retarded hellebores are a tour de force; Kevoek's alpines are the top exhibit in my book; and the stands of flowering cacti, superb gladioli, Amand's hardy orchids and Crug Farm's rare recent collections from North Vietnam are far better for my wellbeing than the RHS "hub" outdoors. I can pay the top exhibitors no higher compliment than to say their effects match up to the flowers for last Saturday's royal wedding. No doubt you loved that dress and maybe you loved the sermons but you have to have loved the flowers around the entrance to St George's Chapel and its pillars indoors. What a relief not to see big trees crammed inside the church again, like those potted hornbeams at Kate and William's wedding.

Florist Philippa Craddock hit the heights with garlands of roses around the doorway, 8,000 flowers in all, I have discovered, mainly from two English rose varieties, Purity and Patience. Both were bred by David Austin but his nurseries sell them only as cut-flowers because the plants are a flop in gardens. Chelsea's indoor exhibitors beat the world because they too show flowers in perfect condition and display them with an innate sense of style and colour.



The Trailfinders South African Wine Estate designed by Jonathan Snow

"natural" meadows would be banned.

Every year I go back home from the show and am delighted on opening my garden gate to re-meet white scented viburnums, wisterias, heavenly lilacs and early roses like the shining yellow Helen Knight, all in flower and waiting to restore me to "wellbeing" without a hint of mauve or stale purple. If I gardened on acid soil, the welcome would be enhanced by azaleas, white Palestrina and fine rhododendrons, but the brash rosy pink one fronting this year's Morgan Stanley garden would be sent to the Home Office to be denied an entry visa. Designers for the main gardens at Chelsea pitch absurdly-themed briefs to PR departments and patrons, whereas the show's paying visitors love gardening. They would love to see dreamy versions of the