

House & Home

Chelsea's gold standard

Visitors to this year's horticultural show will find much to enjoy but is the sustainability theme a lot of hot air?

As usual, Chelsea Flower Show has pulled in the crowds: 168,000 ticket holders will have passed through by 4.30pm on Saturday, when selected plants in the exhibits begin to be sold off. The clematis have been exceptionally fine, marking the 30th anniversary of Thorncroft nurseries (thorncroftclematis.co.uk) and the advances that continue to be made by Raymond Evison and his breeders (raymondevisonclematis.com).

The central monument in the main pavilion pays a fitting tribute to David Austin, the great rose-breeder who died in December. The orchids from McBean's, the alpinas from Kevoek, the flowering bulbs from Jacques Amand and the superb gladioli from Pheasant Acre are only a few of the first-class exhibits indoors.

There is so much to enjoy, even if fewer nurseries are exhibiting. My flower of the show is an unusually clear yellow iris with white standards, *Vicomtesse de Cures*. New this year from Cayeux irises (iris-cayeux.com), it costs £27 a plant, but its French nurseryman thinks it will flower well in "England". It has up to 10 flowers on each stem. It has taken 15 years for his team to breed it.

The gardens outdoors range from Back to Nature with the help of the Duchess of Cambridge to M&G's green woodland with a staircase of "vast English ironstone platforms" and some odd rock formations "made from 15 tonnes of sustainable burnt-oak timber

by the British craftsman Johnny Woodford". Somebody had to fell and burn that oak in the first place. Those shifting mirages, the natural and the sustainable, shimmered beyond me as I emerged on to Main Avenue from an arching tunnel of back-lit flowers.

This tunnel aims to make us appreciate the world through bees' eyes. Somebody must think that bees respond to bad Latin. The brand-name for the tunnel is Latin-based, "Per oculus apum". Bees are a hard working-class with high standards. They ought to sting the tunnel's PR team as they have managed two gross non-Latin howlers in three words.

What about the main feature gardens beyond? They have a very difficult brief. They have to look good on flat sites, be stared at by passing crowds, and they have to have a theme for their sponsors. The big ones cost a lot of money — up to £500,000 being signed off, sometimes more. This context keeps them far from any real gardener's life.

Here are my gold medals for big feature gardens. They certainly do not go to the many gardens which have uprooted big willow trees, hawthorns or fruit trees and underplanted them with buttercups and cow parsley as if they are combating perils to our planet and meeting the need for "sustainability". Like the messy planting, the thinking here is muddled. The RHS should be putting the H into horticulture, not "hedgerow". There is no eco-crime in growing lovely biennials like Canterbury bells which



The Trailfinders 'Undiscovered Latin America' garden designed by Jonathan Snow — RHS / Neil Hepworth



Robin Lane Fox

On gardens

die naturally after flowering. Cow parsley looks a mess for most of the year. If sustainability is the new aim, the first candidate for extinction has to be a flower show like Chelsea. Think of all the fuel burnt by the lorries that bring in the exhibitors' disposable turf and restyled "natural" weeds.

The Dubai Majlis garden is one of my winners. It is far better than its PR. A *majlis* in Arabic is a place where people sit. The Dubai garden aims to be a "calm, contemplative space to meet, learn about future cultures and discuss future collaborations that will change the world". As visitors cannot enter or sit in this one, "majlissing" will not become part of Chelsea chit-chat. I also wonder what those world-changing conversations might turn out to be. According to the hype, "Dubai's vibrancy is sustained by its Bedouin heritage, multicultural population and ultra modern architecture". That leaves out a lot.

The hot air around these gardens inflates the designers' theme. The majlis garden's designer, Thomas Hoblyn, has done an excellent job in bringing it back to earth. Grey-leaved lamb's ear, red-flowered little adonis, good parrotia trees and some furry

grey-leaved salvias vary the range of planting beyond anything native to Dubai. The garden has a strong ground-plan and a good colour to its stone. The idea is to show plants from arid regions which can "now" be grown in the UK. Moroccan date palms are not trees I would risk outdoors north of Watford. Yellow-flowered woad is not exactly "arid" nor a newcomer. Even before Queen Boudica, woad-juice dyed the bodies of ancient Britons blue.



Donkey Sanctuary garden by Christina Williams and Annie Prebensen
RHS / Tim Sandall

My top vote goes to the "Undiscovered Latin America" garden, sponsored by Trailfinders. It aims to evoke some of the diverse flora of Chile at three ascending levels, culminating in a waterfall and a line of monkey puzzle trees bought in from a nursery in Italy. The designer, Jonathan Snow, went to Chile for ideas and then linked up with Kelways nursery a year in advance for his choice of Chilean flowers. He decided to evoke the flora at around 1,500m, where monkey puzzles meet small-leaved nothofagus trees. Lower down, I admired his white-flowered Chilean libertias but complained that he had included non-Chilean diascias. "They are Chilean red alonsoas," he corrected me. The planting here is just as sustainable as a hawthorn tree and some ragged robin, masquerading as Welcome to Yorkshire.

Lastly, my top small gardens. One is the Campaign for Female Education in Africa's brightly coloured Afro-garden. The other, on the Artisans' avenue, is the Donkey Sanctuary garden, designed with economy and colour sense by Christina Williams and Annie Prebensen from Devon. Their charming stone terracing shows dark-flowered irises, purple lavender and clear pink, hardy little geraniums among much else. It evokes a dry Mediterranean landscape in which donkeys might work and endure rough treatment.

When I visited, the unsustainable Joanna Lumley was being photographed with two dark donkeys. The eco-themers on Main Avenue would have set her among nothing but donkey-compatible nettles.