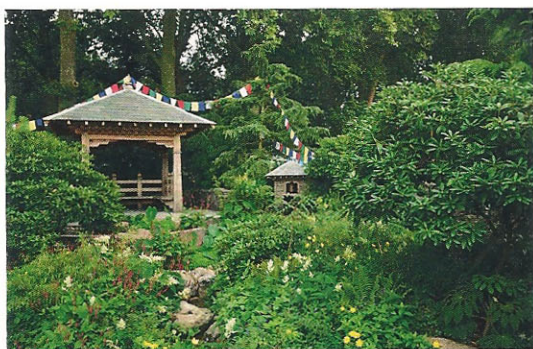


THE RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW 2021

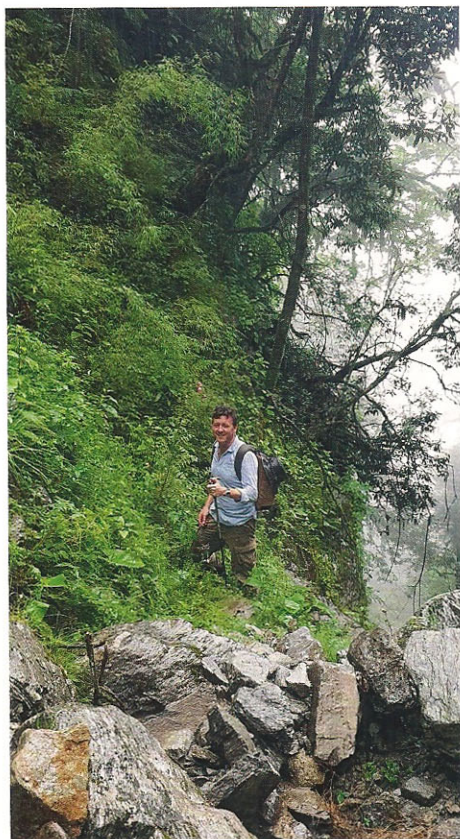


The Trailfinders' 50th Anniversary Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2021

In July 2019, shortly after finishing my second Show Garden at the Chelsea Flower Show, I was invited by my sponsor, Trailfinders, to complete the trilogy of destination focussed gardens, at what would eventually become the first ever autumn Flower Show, in September 2021. My previous Chelsea gardens had featured South African 'fynbos' planting, and Chilean temperate rainforest planting, in 2018 and 2019 respectively, and the sponsor wanted to celebrate fifty years in business by returning to their first destination (Kathmandu), and by asking me to design a Himalayan garden.

Research began in earnest, with trips to the West Coast of Scotland in the summer of 2019, as the climate there is wet and relatively warm, and so presents ideal growing conditions for many plants of Himalayan origin, that grow between elevations of 2-4000m. This was followed up by a trip to Nepal later that summer, to gain a better understanding of how the plants grow in their natural environment, as well as to study the landscape and architecture in more detail. My aim was to evoke the region by distilling all the best elements of it, rather than a pastiche copy of what might be found there, and I always try to make my gardens at Chelsea relevant to visitors, by choosing destinations whose native plants are well known in UK gardens.

The design was drawn up and submitted to the RHS selection panel that autumn, and eventually approved. And so began the process of sourcing the 5,000 or so plants that go into a Show Garden, along with designing all the hard landscaping elements; working with joiners, stonemasons, water feature engineers and other craftsmen to create my version of the Himalayan foothills, on Main Avenue.



Jonathan researching and plant hunting near Lukla in north-eastern Nepal in 2019



Jonathan with Dawa Sherpa and his wife Angdiki Sherpa. They live in Scotland where they co-run a plant nursery

And then Covid arrived on our shores and it became clear that the May show would be postponed, which it was, by a year, to May 2021, and then again to September 2021. I initially decided against an autumn garden at Chelsea, because so many of my plants would not be in flower, and they had taken a long time to source, but the sponsor wanted to continue and was happy to pay the extra costs associated with two postponements, and an almost completely new plant list.

Finally, after all the uncertainty of the previous eighteen months, and two years of preparation, we began building the garden on 31 August, starting with a bare patch of ground measuring 22m x 10m, and twenty days to fill it. We were fortunate to be blessed with glorious weather for all but one of the days of the build, but nonetheless it took a huge effort from the forty or so people crawling all over the garden every day, from dawn till dusk, to finish on time.

I don't think I've ever had such a wonderful three weeks in my working career, when everything clicked into place and the whole team, from all different walks of life and trades worked so well together. On medals day I was absolutely delighted to receive, on behalf of everyone involved, the much-coveted Gold Medal, and the award for Best Construction. I'll be taking a break from Chelsea next year and returning to the day job of designing real gardens but hope to be back at some point in the future.

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