

CHELSEA 2007

The Royal Horticultural Society's Chelsea Flower Show never fails to stimulate or provoke. **Benedict Vanheems** reviews this year's highlights. Photography by **Anne Hardy**



τ 600 days with Bradstone

Sarah Eberle's '600 days with Bradstone' garden was a brave contrast to the sea of geometry on offer in the majority of other show gardens. This otherworldly space, representing a garden for astronauts on a 600-day tour of Mars, was either going to meet with scorn or applause — but certainly not indifference. Thankfully, the RHS was impressed, so much so it won Best in show, representing a real break with tradition. The garden's paving did bring to mind the surface of Mars, while handsome rammed earth walls framed and divided the garden up into its two areas: a space for food and medicinal crops, and a space to relax and unwind. An eclectic mix of planting — succulents and cacti jostling with giant bowls of watercress and calendula — helped heighten that sense of an alien world. The garden was the culmination of exhaustive research; an exciting experiment that would look equally at home at Chaumont as it did at Chelsea.

υ Laurent-Perrier Garden

True to form, Jinny Blom's 'Laurent-Perrier garden' employed her frothy, candy sweet herbaceous planting to good effect, creating a carpet of floriferous profusion made up in the main of umbellifers, such as astringent and lacy *Ammi majus* and *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing'. Eruptions of *Deschampsia caespitosa* and *Stipa gigantea* broke through, as did handsome columns of the oak *Quercus robur* f. *fastigiata* 'Koster', which helped lift interest from the ground plane and lend a much-needed air of solidity. Geometric paths of Travertine marble on concrete plinths ploughed through the planting to lead to a moon gate centrepiece suspended above a clear, square pool. Here was the clever bit: a red sandstone disk positioned behind the moon gate appeared to wax and wane as you moved past it — a simple illusion that worked a treat.





Main show garden winners

Gold medal winners:

- '600 days with Bradstone' by Sarah Eberle MSGD. Contractor: Hillier Landscapes. Sponsor: Bradstone.
- 'A tribute to Linnaeus' by Ulf Nordfjell. Contractor: Brambles Garden Services. Sponsors: The National Linnaeus Tercentenary Committee with the Embassy of Sweden and the Swedish Institute.
- 'Cancer Research UK garden' by Andy Sturgeon MSGD. Contractor: The Outdoor Room. Sponsor: Cancer Research UK.
- 'Urban oasis' by Laurie Chetwood and Patrick Collins. Contractor: Willerby Landscapes. Sponsor: Chetwoods.
- 'Laurent-Perrier garden' by Jinny Blom. Contractor: Crocus.co.uk. Sponsor: Laurent-Perrier.
- 'The Fetzer sustainable winery garden' by Kate Frey. Sponsor: Fetzer Vineyards.
- 'The Fortnum and Mason garden' by Robert Myers. Contractor: Willerby Landscape. Sponsor: Fortnum and Mason.

Silver-gilt flora medal winners:

- 'The Chris Beardshaw garden' by Chris Beardshaw. Contractor: Peter Dowle Plants and Gardens. Sponsor: Buildbase.
- 'Fleming's and Trailfinders Australian garden' by Mark Browning. Contractor: Kiama Landscapes and Paving. Sponsors: Fleming's Nurseries & Trailfinders.
- 'The Savills garden' by Marcus Barnett and Philip Nixon. Contractor: Landform Consultants. Sponsor: Savills.
- 'The Daily Telegraph garden' by Isabelle Van Groeningen and Gabriella Pape. Contractor: Crocus.co.uk. Sponsor: Telegraph Media Group.

- 'The Westland Garden' by Diarmuid Gavin and Stephen Reilly. Contractor: Richard Hill. Sponsor: Westland Horticulture.

Silver flora medal winners:

- 'The Amnesty International garden for human rights' by Paula Ryan. Contractors: Millbrook Landscapes and Hillier Landscapes. Sponsor: Amnesty International UK.
- 'Scent of a Roman' by Leeds City Council parks and countryside service. Contractor: Leeds City Council parks and countryside service. Sponsors: Thorpe Park Developments and Haddonstone.
- 'The Marshalls' sustainability garden' by the Scenic Blue Design Team. Contractor: Scenic Blue (UK). Sponsor: Marshalls.
- 'The Thomas Telford toll house garden' by Michael Vout and Chris Jones. Sponsors: Telford and Wrekin Council.
- 'The Brett Landscaping garden — relationships garden' by Geoffrey Whiten. Contractor: Landscape Concepts. Sponsor: Brett Landscaping and Building Products.

Bronze medal winners:

- 'Through the moongate' by Lesley Bremness. Contractor: Paul Dyer's Very Interesting Water Feature Company. Sponsor: Royal Bank of Scotland Group and Bank of China.
- 'Hasmead sand and ice garden' by Linda Bush. Contractor: Hasmead. Sponsor: Hasmead.
- 'Lloyds TSB garden' by Trevor Tooth. Contractor: Trevor Tooth Garden Practice. Sponsor: Lloyds TSB.

For more winners, visit the website: www.rhs.org.uk

p Savills Garden

The 'Savills garden' by Marcus Barnett and Philip Nixon took the riverscapes of southern England as its inspiration. The rivers were interpreted as interlocking ink-black pools criss-crossed by bridges and walls capped in mellow Western red cedar and cleanly edged in aluminium. The planting successfully alluded to a river context, either through a billowing tapestry of blues and yellows featuring such plants as *Heuchera* 'White Spires', blue-flowered aquilegias and *Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low', or in the choice of moisture-lovers like *Petasites hybridus*, *Darmera peltata* and *Ligularia* 'Gregynog Gold' and the tree selection of *Salix alba* and *Populus nigra* 'Italica'. While the flint rendering of the walls was true to concept, its freshness meant it was mildly overpowering, especially viewing the garden head on; this would not be an issue, however, if this was a 'real' garden left to age gracefully. Enjoyment of the garden extended into the night through carefully positioned lighting.



† The Westland Garden

Diarmuid Gavin made a return after last year's absence. This time there were no coloured balls on sticks and the garden felt a little more grown up. It still had a touch of the Teletubbies about it, however, thanks to box balls crowned by radiating flower mosaics and suspended bubble chairs within the studio's veranda, which dominated the garden. The planting to the front comprised a restrained palette of green, purples and bronzes. This sat easily with the studio, where floor to ceiling windows created a space that truly brought the outside in. The addition of exotic and exotic-hinting plants — *Echium pininana*, *Rodgersia aesculifolia* and *Dicksonia antarctica* — gave the garden a generously lush finish.



p Urban Oasis

The 'Urban oasis' by Paul Collins and architect Laurie Chetwood was another unconventional arrival to Chelsea. In fact, 'landing' may be a more appropriate word, as the central 12m-high structure looked more like an alien craft than a garden sculpture. This incorporated a smorgasbord of environmental technologies, including photovoltaic wings and a wind turbine to draw up water for irrigation and power the lighting at night. Suckling at the mother ship were fingers of planting, thick towards its energy source and tapering away to the periphery. Bubbles of yew, grasses and soft herbaceous perennials followed water rills out over a plinth of stacked limestone.

Takeaway design bites

Garden designer Anne Hardy picks her favourite eye-catching ideas and techniques from the show.

Memories of glass tubes filled with layers of coloured sand are evoked by the rock and rammed earth walls used by Sarah Eberle in '600 days with Bradstone'.



Mark Browning uses the triangle as a recurring shape for this functional living space in the 'Fleming's and Trailfinders Australian garden'. The shape is picked up in the interior light and table.

Diarmuid Gavin creates rhythm and balance by repeating the horizontals of wooden planks in both the studio and loungers in 'The Westland garden'.

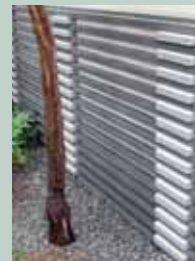


Andy Sturgeon deftly entwines his garden with a 30m-long ribbon of curved oak in the 'Cancer Research UK garden'.

In Ulf Nordfjell's 'A tribute to Linnaeus' the hard qualities of granite are softened with a mound of green and by imperceptibly raising the millstone a few millimetres off the ground.



Reminiscent of walls designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole for his Chelsea 2005 garden 'In the grove', the 'The Marshalls' sustainability garden' included a wall repeating the word 'sustain' in stamped metal pinned between wooden batons.



This sub-water surface circle resonates with the skylight and the mass planting of sempervivum in 'The Amnesty International garden for human rights' by Paula Ryan.



Caroline De Lane Lea and Louise Cummins have used the unusual material of cork for the seat, wall sculpture and water bowl in 'The Suber garden' (chic category).



† Marshalls' Sustainability Garden

The show sponsor's garden — 'Marshalls' sustainability garden' — was put together by the Scenic Blue Design Team. It aimed to demonstrate how a garden could be sustainable without compromising design standards. The garden packed in: gabion walls containing waste stone; crushed glass cubes surrounding an irrigation pool; reed beds for filtering grey water; ethically sourced Indian sandstone; and a garden studio surrounded by a wildflower-strewn earth mound. The main planting area incorporated herbs, vegetables and fruit trees, which worked well with the other herbaceous plants, but the intermittent blue pyramids housing solar panels brought to mind trapped bluebottles in glass jars. It is interesting to note that Marshalls' calculation for its garden's embodied carbon footprint came out at 16.5 tonnes — a value equivalent to 18 months' footprint for the average UK citizen. It would be fascinating to learn how the other gardens compared in this respect. Perhaps this might even become a requirement in the years to come?

u A Tribute to Linnaeus

Swedish designer Ulf Nordfjell's 'Tribute to Linnaeus' celebrated the tercentenary of botanist Carl Linnaeus. It was a well-proportioned garden divided by a staggered timber wall faced on one side with traditional Swedish-style red iron oxide-painted clapboarding and on the other with silver-painted boards. Flat-cut crowns of *Malus* 'Evereste' and Scandinavian pine and birch created a roof to the garden. The planting felt sophisticated, with a shady mix of cool greens and whites, and purple and green. This was a very contemporary garden that balanced modern styles and materials, such as steel artwork panels and edging, with a deep sense of traditional values. It worked effortlessly.





† **Cancer Research UK Garden**

Andy Sturgeon's 'Cancer Research UK garden' featured perhaps the most ambitious feature in show: 30m-long curving ribbons of oak, which formed a deliciously successful counterpoint to the parallel limestone paths running the length of his garden. Buttresses of yew broke up the packed planting running to a minimalist black-framed pavilion inspired by Japanese architecture. The pavilion appeared to float, with the planting creeping beneath it. Sturgeon's cubes appeared this time as lime-coloured seating within the pavilion, while a louvered wall of copper created a recessive but unusual backdrop to the garden.

A different take

Show judges Jill Billington and Andrew Wilson reveal what they thought of the standard of gardens at this year's show.



Jill Billington MSGD

The standard of gardens at the show is increasingly reaching a superb but rather unattainable standard. The aesthetics and knowledge displayed in so many of the large gardens raises the profile of garden design — not just the media 'take' but the esteem of the RHS. They are a joy, particularly Sarah Eberle's imaginative Martian escape, Ulf Nordfjell's elegant 'Tribute to Linnaeus' and the flamboyant hard landscape of the 'Urban oasis'. However, plants sometimes filled beds as if they were flower arrangements for vases, with no sense of each plant requiring its space; although the result is charming and popular, it does not represent the art of 'planting'.

The small gardens are less inclined towards luxury and many are practical and attainable, as evidenced by Adam Frost's 'Realistic retreat' (city category). In some of the roof gardens the beautifully executed 'hard' detailing was let down by planting of a much lower standard. Here, again, it is not simply a matter of pretty combinations. When the marks are awarded any weakness will show and lower the medal awarded. Sensitivity is valued and this year there were fewer gardens that depended on some flashy motif. The smaller spaces are taken as seriously as those of the larger gardens, as was seen last year in the fine standards of the smaller gardens at the RHS Flower Show at Tatton Park.

One comment several judges made is that it is particularly disappointing when some student work displays lack of rigour in both use of space and plant selection. Spatial considerations are a very large part of what design is about and accuracy with plant choice is essential. The gardens that are mood setters, creating a period piece or a geographical place (both are always popular) are less challenging from the pure design point of view. But even in small spaces neither plants nor people should be confined and in some cases, the gardens were uncomfortable.

On the whole it was a very good year and some of it very encouraging for our profession.



Andrew Wilson FSGD

There was something about this year's show that I found invigorating — a sense of energy that hasn't been tangible in some of the previous years. Perhaps it was just the way in which the sun came out for the week but I rather think that it was the character and quality of so many of the show gardens.

Although I was stunned by the spectacular 'Tribute to Linnaeus' which was both a spatial and planting triumph, it was the '600 days with Bradstone' garden that caught my attention. For many this was a gimmicky garden and some questioned why this should fare so well, receiving Best in show. It was, in fact, a serious research project, examining if and how any of this might happen on Mars. The spin-off for Eberle was amazing hard materials, well-proportioned spaces, high-quality planting and a great sense of fun and adventure which are rarely seen in Chelsea gardens.

The fact that the malus and cornus on the Linnaeus garden were stubbornly refusing to come into leaf and bloom at the time of judging allowed a gold medal but probably cost the exhibit what many people thought should be Best in show. There were one or two other design issues with the garden but by Thursday the offending plants had caught up and looked magnificent — the showmanship that produces this for the Monday morning may seem irrelevant to some critics, but it is this attention to detail that marks Chelsea out as the premier show.

Elsewhere, good spatial design was balancing out the emphasis on planting. This will always be a horticultural show but the quality of design has progressed steadily over the last decade, led by Christopher Bradley-Hole and Tom Stuart-Smith. Jinny Blom, Marcus Barnett and Philip Nixon, and especially Andy Sturgeon showed confident and lively spaces full of air and elegance. Sturgeon's floating pavilion and intricate oak structure could find a home in my garden any day. This progressive approach is changing the face of the show and potential exhibitors need to analyse carefully how they might deliver the gardens of the future, hopefully leaving overstuffed borders behind for good.