



All the highlights from Chelsea Flower Show 2021: gold medal gardens, colour trends and prize plants

Despite the gaudy charms of late summer, the subtler shades of autumn took centre stage at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year

By Stephen Lacey

24 September 2021 • 12:00pm

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How lovely it is to be back on the Chelsea showground! “Everyone needs cheering up, and everyone is feeling that sense of uplift,” said a gardening colleague, capturing the mood as he headed off in pursuit of salvias and fuchsias. And heightening the anticipation has been the fact that this is the first time the show has ever been staged in September, offering a fresh panoply of plants and planting opportunities.

So, on arrival I was expecting to walk into a wall of beaming dahlias (like Andie McDowell’s Dahlia Beach exhibit, above), rose hips and fruiting trees, golden helianthus and pampas grass. An evocation of the much-missed Great Autumn Shows once held in Westminster.

But no, this turns out to be a mellow, calm, rather green Chelsea – certainly among the gardens – reflecting themes of sanctuary, healing and health. Plants are to the fore, building footprints lighter – “Less waste, that’s very refreshing,” says Tom Stuart-Smith. Of course, there are still theatrical jolts here and there: a double-decker bus sprouting tree ferns; giant horses rearing high above Main Avenue, gushing water – “Whoever heard of water coming from horses’ hooves?” muttered one onlooker.





The N1 Garden Centre celebrated autumn in this Houseplant Studio | CREDIT: Heathcliff O'malley

But overall, subtlety reigns, which is a little out of kilter with a season that is really quite jolly. “Coming into the show, it felt almost like jet lag,” said Fergus Garrett of Great Dixter. “It wasn’t until I saw the pink colchicums inside the Pavilion that I found my feet.”

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Charlotte Harris and Hugo Bugg’s gold-winning M&G Garden, conceived as an urban haven for people and wildlife on a former industrial site, does have some autumnal twinkle in its planting, with violet-blue asters (‘Twilight’ and ‘October Skies’), white, cow parsley-like *Selinum wallichianum*, and golden-leaved *Amsonia illustris* woven together in one of the most exquisite and sensitively composed tapestries of perennials I have seen in a long time. “Beautiful,” said garden designer Andy Sturgeon. “And I don’t apply that word very often to Chelsea gardens.”

Underpinned by faultless construction and finish by Crocus, the money was riding on this garden to garner the Best Show Garden award. But it seems the judges were troubled by aspects of it (the delicate nature of the planting, the scarcity of seats, the industrial pipes – “Anything to do with the Russian gas pipeline?” someone asked), which did not appear compatible with its use by adults and children as a city park.



The Trailfinders 50th Anniversary Garden won Gold for Jonathan Snow's evocation of the Himalayas | CREDIT: Heathcliff O'malley

Instead, the top prize was scooped by the Guangzhou Garden, and no one was more surprised than its designer, the charming Peter Chmiel. “Excited, delighted, overwhelmed,” was his reaction to the news. For Peter and his co-designer Chin-Jung Chen, this is their very first Chelsea garden. “But after such a great experience, I think we’ll be back.” David Dodd, whose Outdoor Room built the garden and who has long been a jovial, generous-hearted Chelsea presence, was bordering on tears: it is his [first Best in Show](#).

The concept is a green artery carrying nature through the city – progressing from woodland through glade to lagoon – and it is elegantly executed. Woven-bamboo structures resembling cocoons punctuate the garden and, together with metasequoia trees, frame what is predominantly green and white planting. There are lovely foliage contrasts of papyrus-like cyperus, erect horsetail and heart-shaped pontederia in the water, and on the banks I like the partnership of white *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Alba’ and sky-blue *Salvia uliginosa*.



The Best Show Garden award went to the Guangzhou Garden, designed by Peter Chmiel with Chin-Jung Chen | CREDIT: Heathcliff O'malley

All the golds

Another cocoon swings in the centre of [Tom Massey's gold-winning Yeo Valley Organic Garden](#) – so attractive to wildlife that a lizard has already moved in. Massey's cocoon is made of oak, has a glass floor, and is connected to a chain pulley, so you can hoist yourself up and admire the 'Tawny King' kniphofias and charred, recycled ash tree stumps below. I would love something like this in my own garden to counter the loss of sun in the late afternoon: but to rocket me 40ft into the tree canopy, I would need a good motor on it.

A reason many of the gardens are more muted in colour than they might have been is that their plant content was fixed (and paid for) in expectation of [a Chelsea](#) held in May. Jonathan Snow's Trailfinders' Garden, an evocation of the Himalayas at an altitude of 6,500ft-13,000ft, would have looked very different had his large, dominant, pink-flowered rhododendrons been in bloom. Probably they would have been visible from Battersea Power Station. Instead, they are green and shadowy, and his garden has gained mystery and atmosphere because of it.



Hanging chair on the Yeo Valley Organic Garden by Tom Massey, which won a Gold medal | CREDIT: Clara Molden

In fact, it is quite magical ducking through their exposed trunks to discover water trickling over rocks and flowing in rills across stone paths, and to enjoy the patterns of creeping rubus, hairy *Bergenia ciliata* and other evergreen foliage on the slopes. I love this sort of exotic woodland gardening, and I am freshly inspired to add more late-flowering eye-catchers among my own ferns and hellebores – especially the broad-leaved roscoeas, yellow *Cautleya spicata*, and hedychiums (all from the ginger family) on display here, which have such presence and panache. Apart from hydrangeas, the shady parts of many gardens are pretty quiet at this time of year, and they don't need to be.

Scrumptiously scented, and dodgily hardy, *Hedychium gardnerianum* is the species featured in the Trailfinders' Garden, but there are more varieties inside the Great Pavilion on the Plant Heritage exhibit. Manning it is Andrew Gaunt, who works for Defra by day and tends his national collection of 250 different sorts of hedychium by night – well, evenings and weekends.

He tells me that two of the best and hardiest species for semi-shade are *H. forrestii* and *H. spicatum*, so that is where I shall start.

The Great Pavilion

The Great Pavilion is nowhere near as full as normal [this Chelsea](#), and it is odd not seeing the massed tulips or catching the scents of David Austin Roses. But there are still some miraculous apparitions. Alliums in September – you can't be serious!

Tom Brown of West Dean was marvelling at the quality of the plants on the Raymond Evison Clematis stand. This is a tour de force, and in contrast to most of the gardens outside, such a blast of colour. All his selections are compact and repeat-flowering, his latest being an intense purple called 'Duchess of Cornwall'. It is a good one, but my eyes keep returning to 'Nubia', a sumptuous crimson-red.



The bright and innovative Pop Street container garden by artist John McPherson | CREDIT: Clara Molden

Medwyn's of Anglesey has notched up a 13th gold medal, but Medwyn says he is getting old and this may be his last show. I think he has said that before. Curly 'Medusa' kale and Spanish black radish feature among the 43 types of vegetable on display. "Naked veg are more colourful than flowers," he declares. On the same tack, I enjoy the idea of herbs and other edibles for grazing, decoratively set out in raised beds around a dining terrace in The Parsley Box garden.

This is the busy dispatch period for bulb nurseries, but Jacques Amand has managed a small stand, on which the highlights are lilac-tipped *Colchicum bornmuelleri*, hardy pale pink *Nerine bowdenii* 'Vesta', and rich pink *Amarine tubergenii* 'Anastasia'. Another charmer is Hartside Nursery's little wheeled handcart smothered in electrifying shades of blue autumn gentians. I have never had much luck with these, but now I have been told (no doubt for the umpteenth time) the recipe for success – sun, grit, bark, and ericaceous compost kept not too wet and not too dry – I shall sally forth again. The third small exhibit mesmerising me is Growtropicals' "paludarium", a living rainforest cabinet to enjoy indoors – intriguing.

Tendercare's *Tilia henryana*, a small, slow-growing lime tree that is usefully late-flowering, wins my prize for scent, with, as runner-up, Form Plants' *Heptacodium miconioides*, a large shrub sporting clusters of white flowers smelling of coconut.





Jewel-toned flowers by Arthur Parkinson chimed with bold planting by Ann-Marie Powell on the Gaze Burvill stand – and won the Director General Award | CREDIT: Clara Molden

I know where I am with scents, but on matters of colour taste I am being challenged. On Pheasant Acre's dahlia exhibit, I met Rachel de Thame singing the praises of 'Kilburn Glow', an astonishing neon magenta-red waterlily type that is well beyond my comfort zone. Arthur Parkinson, Instagram guru and dahlia doyen, had a little earlier been encouraging me to try an even racier coral-orange anemone dahlia called 'Totally Tangerine'. Perhaps I need to open my mind to this sort of 21st-century tint.

Parkinson has been adding floristry stardust to the already rich colour palette with which Ann-Marie Powell has ringed the Gaze Burvill trade stand. Her planting stands out as a beacon on Main Avenue, and the garden has deservedly received the Director General Award.

I love the dark, saturated hue of *Lobelia x speciosa* 'Hadspen Purple' and the pairing of tall and airy *Verbena bonariensis* with the purple-tinged grass *Panicum virgatum* 'Squaw'.

For sure this is the moment to embrace the nurturing, healing aspect of gardens, as Chelsea 2021 has done, but as we move on, there will surely be an increasing appetite for stimulation and adventure, sparkle and fun.

Ann-Marie Powell's garden points the way. So does 'Pop Street', a container garden designed by John McPherson, lively with pop-art bowls and murals, painted cans and pots: "A space to jump-start the transition from lockdown to on-the-town."

All strength to his elbow. Chelsea 2022 – time to party.

Take home and grow



Dahlia: 'Kilburn Glow' is an astonishing neon magenta-red waterlily type

Gentian: They need sun, grit, bark, and ericaceous compost, kept not too wet and not too dry

Amarine: Rich pink 'Anastasia' was one of the highlights of the Jacques Amand stand

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