



Channelling OCTAVIA HILL



Ann-Marie Powell is returning to Main Avenue with a garden that celebrates the work of an iconic National Trust founder

WORDS: NINA MASON

It might be somewhat hard to believe, but Ann-Marie Powell's show garden this year will mark her debut with a large garden on Main Avenue. The garden designer has appeared at Chelsea and other RHS shows, scooping up various awards throughout her career; but this year she will be making her debut on the highly-coveted part of the Chelsea showground – and she's not wasting the opportunity.

The Octavia Hill Garden will be a “big, green, horticultural soapbox” for the vivacious designer, she says. “Chelsea is the best place to talk about horticulture, gardening, plants and access to green space, and it's one of the



Ann-Marie Powell

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last big career ticks that I wanted to do, to have a large garden on Main Avenue. It's almost happened so many times, and I'm so grateful that it's finally happening.” Powell was the first choice for Andy Jasper, director of gardens and parklands at the National Trust, which is supporting

the show garden alongside Blue Diamond Garden Centres. He'd worked with her as programme director for RHS Hilltop at Wisley, where Powell designed the World Food Garden and the Wildlife Garden.

For the last year and a half, the National Trust and Blue Diamond have been collaborating on a series of projects, including an exclusive range stocked on the garden retailer's shelves. Blue Diamond then approached the National Trust with an idea for a show garden dedicated to one of the founders of the trust, Octavia Hill (1838-1912).

Jasper told those at the Garden Press Event earlier this year that Hill believed everybody needed access to nature and beauty in their life and the ability to actually go into gardens. He added that all the work that the National Trust undertakes can be traced back to Hill and her fellow founders.

Since she met with the National Trust and Blue Diamond back in October 2022 to learn more about the “phenomenal woman” ahead of designing the garden, Powell is a self-described “fan girl” of Hill.

“She was a social activist in Victorian Britain, who really advocated safeguarding and creating green spaces for those who lived in the most deprived areas of cities, and also in the countryside as well. So, I started thinking, what would she want to do if she were alive today?”



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PASTEL DRAWING OF OCTAVIA HILL

A lack of accessible green space remains an issue more than 100 years later. A staggering 6.1 million people in Britain live more than a 10-minute walk from a park or green space, found Fields in Trust's Green Space Index last year – and London is a prime example of how this can vary from borough to borough. Whilst the population size might be similar across

Islington and Harrow, the amount of green space per person is not, with Harrow boasting 36sqm whilst Islington has a meagre seven. With this in mind, Powell wanted to design a green space on a conceptual inner city brownfield site “that would really make a difference in an urban community,” just as Hill used to do, starting with the Red Cross Garden, which was built between buildings in Southwark in the late 1800s.

Powell will be channeling her “inner Octavia” at Chelsea, and the garden will, unsurprisingly, be accessible to all. “We wanted to make sure that there was an experience for everyone, whether you're able bodied or not, or lugging around a buggy. The garden will have an experience with a series of levels for people to access. If you are



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3D VISUAL OF THE OCTAVIA HILL GARDEN BY BLUE DIAMOND WITH THE NATIONAL TRUST

visually impaired or blind, there's an aural experience that's being designed by sound artist Justin Wiggan.”

As a patron of the charity Greenfingers, Powell has worked on children's hospice gardens for more than a decade. Her studio also works with organisations on projects where wheelchair access is a necessity. So, the entire garden at Chelsea is DDA compliant, meaning that slopes are approved for wheelchair use.

“But it is almost like an adventure garden; it's not completely flat without any texture or change. The garden slopes up to the upper level of the platform, and then comes all the way down and slopes in, so you're on a circuit, passing between ‘open air sitting rooms’, which is another key idea of Octavia's – each room has its own atmosphere.”

On top of this, Powell is making sure the show garden is as nature rich as possible. “In the UK, we are losing our wildlife at a worse rate than I even realised myself before I started researching this garden last year – it's staggering.”

She's not wrong, if last year's State of Nature report is anything to go by. Since 1970, nearly a fifth (19%) of UK species that it monitors

have declined, and nearly one in six (16%) species are threatened with extinction in Britain.

The Octavia Hill Garden will use around 3,600 peat-free grown, native and non-native species such as *Celtis sinensis* and *Clematis vitalba* to create a biodiverse garden, with all plants being supplied by Hortus Loci.

“There will be a few pioneer plants, as we're calling them, which are really good for wildlife. But the majority of the planting will be ebullient, exuberant, bold, pollinator-attracting plants.”

Gold-medal winning contractor The Landscaping Consultants will be building the show garden, which is no mean feat. Powell has worked with architect Giles Jollands to design a structure “that is completely integrated into the garden – they have a symbiotic relationship. The garden can't exist without the structure and the structure can't exist without the garden.” The self-sustaining structure, which will not be using concrete, has two layers, with a wildlife observation platform at the top and, on the lower

layer, a wildlife pond and a canopy of plants – or what Powell is calling a “plant cathedral”. There will also be a walk-through stream and the retaining walls to the platform will be formed with thatch, “a traditional craft that Octavia would have approved of, and championing the craftsmanship that still lives in existence but which we're also losing at a rate of decline.”

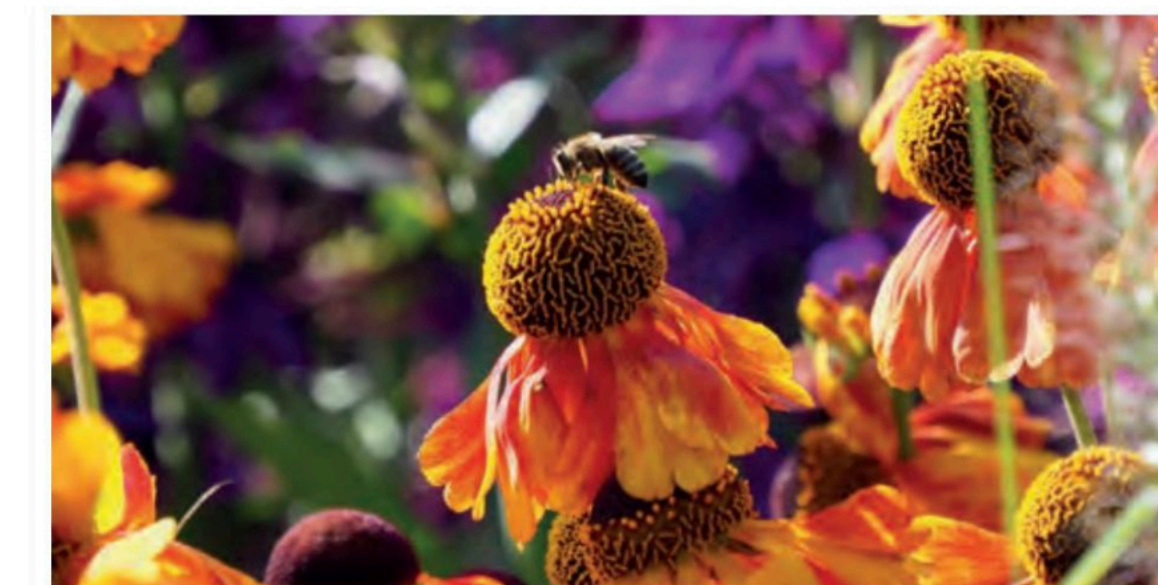
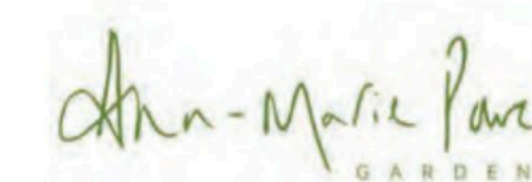
Once the last visitor leaves the Chelsea showground, the garden will be relocated to the Blue Diamond-owned Bridgemere Show Gardens in Nantwich, Cheshire – an RHS partner garden – where Hill's legacy will continue to be celebrated.



BRIDGEMERE SHOW GARDENS, CHESHIRE WHERE THE OCTAVIA HILL GARDEN WILL BE RELOCATED AFTER THE SHOW

©Blue Diamond

“We're working hard to deliver a garden that I hope visitors will enjoy and will really pay testament to a fabulous woman that we should all know more about. I didn't want her to be just an historical figure, someone in the past, but instead someone who is relevant today. So, that's why we designed this, because I think if she was alive, that's what she'd be doing now.” It might have taken a while to check her first large Main Avenue garden off her bucket list, but the opportunity seems to have been well worth the wait.



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