

Chelsea turns 100



Chelsea Flower Show

May 21–25, 2013

Hours 8 a.m.–8 p.m., Tuesday–Friday (Tuesday and Wednesday are members days); until 5:30 p.m. Saturday; sell-off begins at 4 p.m.

Admissions Ticket prices begin at 25 British pounds for a partial-day (5:30 p.m.–8 p.m.) RHS members ticket. A full-day members ticket is 65 pounds. Once in the show, you cannot leave and return. The number of tickets for each day is capped to prevent overcrowding; even so, be prepared to wait in line to view some gardens.

Location The show takes place on the grounds of the Royal Hospital along the Chelsea Embankment of the Thames.

Getting there Take the Tube, hop on a bus: London's Underground system makes it easy to get to the grounds of the Royal Hospital—the nearest Tube station is Sloane Square, a 10-minute walk from the show. Plan your visit on the Transport for London website (www.tfl.gov.uk).



The famous British Mini shows off some flower power in this 2012 Chelsea exhibit.

This year, the grand dame of flower shows, located in a trendy neighborhood in central London, celebrates a century of showcasing gardening as only the English can do it. BY MARTY WINGATE

IT'S THE greatest show on earth—for gardeners—but age has nothing on the Chelsea Flower Show. Celebrating its centenary this year, Chelsea continues to command the respect and adoration of gardeners around the world. The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) runs myriad floral exhibits and shows throughout the year, including the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show in July, a mere babe-in-arms at 23 years old, but Chelsea stands out as the standard to which all others are compared. This year, the invitation is out to gardeners everywhere to join the celebration May 21 to 25.



Above: Queen Mary, center in pale outfit, wife of King George V, tours Chelsea in this early 20th-century photograph. Top: Visitors enjoy a sunny day at last year's flower show.

The event actually began as the Great Spring Show in 1862, before moving to the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea—a home for retired soldiers—in 1913, when it was renamed. Apart from brief interruptions during the two world wars, it has been held there ever since, covering 11 acres each May with gardens outdoors and eye-popping nursery displays in the pavilion.

Chelsea is the gardening equivalent of a Paris runway for fashion. “The designers can be a bit extreme. It’s the ‘catwalk’ mentality,” says Andrew Wilson, a British garden designer and lecturer who has judged show gardens at Chelsea for 17 years. But just as outlandish fashion

ideas percolate until a particular hemline or cut of jacket makes it into our own closets, the ideas at Chelsea sift down until home gardens make use of architectural stone or perennials in a way never before considered.

The show may take place in London, but it’s an international event. And during build-up, which takes place in the two- and-a-half weeks leading up to opening, the grounds are transformed into all manner of gardens. For those who create the gardens, build-up is—to say the least—fraught with anxiety, but not without glory.

“You’re wearing boots and parkas, and it’s raining and there’s a cold wind,” says Alicia Crawford, one of the members of the Lake Forest Garden Club in Illinois that built a garden for the 2006 Chelsea Flower Show. But even rain and mud can’t dampen the experience. “It’s like walking through the pearly gates—more than a dream come true,” recalls Crawford.

THE MAKING OF A SHOW GARDEN

Flowers bloom, grasses stand tall, hedges of solid green delineate the lines of the gardens—just how the displays look so mature in such a short time is a cause for wonder. Chelsea gardens are completed just before the show opens the third week of May, but their conception—and indeed, much of the work of the garden—starts a year or two earlier.

Even before designs are approved, designers and contractors begin searching for and growing the best plants, often “soft-tagging” trees and shrubs for final decision later. Mark Fane, co-owner with Peter Clay of Crocus Nursery in Surrey, England, supplies and builds for two show gardens, so he understands not just the timing, but also the intensity of the work.

“We start the process a year before Chelsea,” Fane says of working with Ulf Nordfjell, a Swedish designer and land-

LEFT: COURTESY OF RHS. TOP: ANDY PARADISE/COURTESY OF RHS

BOTTOM: ANDY PARADISE/COURTESY OF RHS



The Lake Forest Garden Club in Illinois created the award-winning “Ravine Garden” exhibit, above, at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2006. Left: (left to right) Alicia Crawford, Catherine Denckla, and Robin Stuart were among the club members who helped design and install the garden, which depicted the plant community typically found in ravine ecosystems near the shore of Lake Michigan.

scape architect, on the garden sponsored by French champagne house Laurent-Perrier. “Ulf tells us what he wants to achieve, and we say yes, we can do that, or no, it’s too difficult. We always develop a plan B.”

While home gardeners may begin with widely spaced hedge plants and small shrubs surrounded by expanses of mulch, there is no such luxury at Chelsea. “In your garden,” Fane says, “you may have three to four plants per square meter, but in a show garden, there are 35 plants. And that means we must grow two or three times that number.” No bare soil shows in Chelsea displays, so if one plant does not meet the requirements of perfection, another must be waiting in the wings. “For

every square meter of garden space, we have 100 plants growing in the nursery,” Fane says.

AMERICAN GARDENS WELCOME

Sourcing plants from nurseries in the United Kingdom (UK) and European Union makes transportation simple, as far as legalities are concerned, but when those plants come from further afield—such as Illinois—it’s a different story.

The members of the Lake Forest Garden Club, located near Chicago, hold the distinction of being the first Garden Club of America chapter to have a show garden at Chelsea. “Ravine Garden: Gift of a Glacier” was created in a remarkably short time. Whereas some gardens are two years in the making, members of the Lake Forest club devised the idea the summer before, after completing a successful home-and-garden walk fundraiser.

“We thought, what should we do as an encore?” Crawford says. “We could do

a moon landing, but in lieu of that—we could do a garden at Chelsea.” Members quickly committed to the plan, and the entire club moved into high gear.

“We have a strong educational component,” Crawford says. “It was important to us that at Chelsea, the global horticultural stage, we could say there are Americans that do care about climate change,” Crawford says to explain the theme, which highlighted the delicate balance of nature as seen in a landscape the garden club members knew well.

Accompanied by the required phytosanitary certificates, plants were sent to England to be grown on and more North American natives were sourced in the UK.

Chelsea judges are scrupulous, so authenticity is tantamount to success. In order to create the proper Lake Michigan ravine garden, Lake Forest members arrived in London carrying in their luggage at least 30 pebbles each from Lake Michigan. When it came to covering

the ground—no bare soil is allowed at Chelsea—club members found a British source for the necessary half-rotted oak leaves. American red oak (*Quercus rubra*), of course. The judges could tell it was the appropriate species.

The garden, which was designed by Catharina Malmberg-Snodgrass of CMS Design Associates Ltd. and constructed by Mark Gregory of Landform Consultants Ltd. (plus many club members), won a Silver Gilt award and gave the club members great pride in their accomplishment.

Americans made a splash at Chelsea even before 2006, however. In 1929, Minerva Hamilton Hoyt (formally listed as Mrs. Sherman Hoyt and best known for championing the creation of what is now Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California) took it upon herself to create a Chelsea garden. At her own expense, she shipped a load of desert plants to London—many of them, such as ocotillo (*Fouquieria splendens*) with its scarlet blooms, were in flower for the show.



A Royal Chelsea Pensioner takes a break amid American native plants in the Bonterra California Organic Wine Garden at the 2007 show.

COURTESY OF ALICIA CRAWFORD (2)

GRAHAM RICE/GARDENPHOTOS.COM

Hoyt's display made such an impression that she was awarded the Lawrence Medal from the RHS for the best exhibit, followed the next year by being made an Honorary Fellow—the first woman to be given the award for botanical merit. The Royal Botanic Garden, Kew acquired the plant display, and a few plants still exist in the Princess of Wales Conservatory.

THE GREAT SELL-OFF

These days, most plants don't make it to Kew—instead, they are purchased

ing people hoovering up any plant they can," says Fane.

CHANGING TIMES

Chelsea used to be all about plants. Twenty years ago, rhododendrons and other shrubbery filled displays. "Historically," Wilson says, "the show gardens have been a step up from the nursery displays in the pavilion." He remembers that focus shifting in 2000, when award-winning designer Christopher Bradley-Hole created the "Living Sculpture Garden,"

with Mark Gregory. "It is theatrical—the 'wow' factor that is an acknowledgment that these are not real gardens." Judging guidelines themselves are reevaluated every three to five years, Wilson says. Gardens are judged not against each other, but against themselves—their stated intent—and how well they follow the rules.

The bar, therefore, is set high. "I've been to shows all over the world," says Dan Heims, co-owner of Terra Nova Nurseries in Canby, Oregon. "At Chelsea, perfection is the standard. There's



For maximum impact, typical exhibits, like this Laurent-Perrier garden at the 2001 show, are packed with more than 35 plants per square yard.

straight out of the gardens and carried off by shoppers when the Chelsea sell-off begins in the afternoon on the last day of the show. But not all gardens participate.

"I'm pig-headed," Fane says of not participating in the sell-off. Plants from the gardens that he grows for and constructs are held back for a couple of weeks to recover from their "Chelsea hang-over," after which a sale is held at Crocus, normally a mail-order-only nursery. "You spend a year or a year-and-a-half on something and there's a major emotional investment. I'm not interested in watch-

ing which consisted of a flooded rectangle, contemporary materials, and minimal use of plants. It won a gold, and Wilson recalls that many people thought it should have received Best in Show.

"Changes have been quite dramatic," Fane says of the current emphasis on design. "It's true, some of the gardens can be fantastically ridiculous, but there is a seed of truth there."

Just as garden styles change, so must the assessment. "Judging concentrates on the display," says Wilson, who co-founded the London College of Garden Design

not a leaf out of place. There's nothing like it in the U.S."

"One thing I've seen a massive change in," Fane says of the shift in gardens, "is the size of the budget. There's been a huge increase in cost." In the past, the cost may have been covered by nurseries, but these days, sponsorship is big business at Chelsea. Financial institutions such as the Royal Bank of Scotland, charity organizations such as World Vision, and special-interest groups such as the Caravan Club sponsor not just the big show gardens, but also other categories



Chelsea's international flavor extends to embracing American natives. Staghorn sumac (*Rhus typhina*) is a repeated element in this Cancer Research UK-sponsored garden at the 2009 show.

of displays, including Artisan Gardens and Generation Gardens, which focus on small-scale landscapes.

Even the venerable British Broadcasting Corporation, which carries no paid advertising, splashes sponsors' names across televisions throughout the country as the network broadcasts the events at Chelsea.

BEYOND THE SHOW GARDENS

Stepping away from the gardens brings the visitor to the Great Pavilion, where nursery displays elicit as many gasps and sighs as any designer's masterpiece. In years past the nurseries put on their lavish

exhibits to entice head gardeners of large estates to order plants and seeds. Those head gardeners have been replaced these days by regular home gardeners, who still seek to replicate the beauty and perfection.

The pavilion remains steeped in tradition. "You can go to the pavilion," Wilson says, "and know where the lupines are, where the tuberous begonias and the sweet peas are." The nursery displays under cover of the pavilion are seductive enticements to gardeners: delphiniums like a patch of clear blue sky indoors, a field of foxgloves, swathes of Pacific coast irises—yes, the Brits are dab hands, as they would say, at growing our North American natives. Who wouldn't want to place an order and dream of the garden to come?

But even if all an international visitor does is gather up free leaflets, take photos, and jot down plant names, it can be worth it for the ideas and inspiration. New plants are always a draw—Heims, a noted breeder and grower of coral bells and alumroots (*Heuchera* spp.), notices every use of them in the horticultural and artistic displays—even if they are older, more established selections. "It's the acme of horticulture," Heims says.

Despite its age—or perhaps because of it—the Chelsea Flower Show remains a gardening mecca. Just ask the members of the Lake Forest club. Six years later, Crawford, who has attended the show ma-



Visitors view displays of roses in the Great Pavilion at the 2012 show.

TIPS FOR AMERICANS VISITING CHELSEA

- Dress in layers and bring a broly (umbrella): The average temperature in London in May is upper 50s to low 60s degrees Fahrenheit, and it is England, after all, so rain is quite likely.
- Buy a program: You may not use it on the day as much as later to remind yourself of what you've seen. Pick up leaflets at all the gardens and in the pavilion, too.
- Take a break and try a Pimm's: Pimm's No. 1 Cup—a concoction of gin, liqueurs, and fruit extract—has been around since 1823. A Pimm's Original is mixed with fizzy lemonade and comes accompanied by a strawberry, slice of cucumber and orange, and sprig of mint. Buy it by the glass or jug—it's a classic.
- Enjoy the setting: The Royal Chelsea Pensioners, who reside at the hospital, can be seen strolling the grounds in their scarlet coats.
- Make careful purchases: Be tempted by the plants and seed packets, but opt for making a shopping list for home instead of buying. There are too many restrictions on what you can bring back to the United States. If you join the RHS, you can buy from the organization's seed list.
- While you are there: Take advantage of your trip and visit some of the National Trust gardens (www.nationaltrust.org.uk). Schedule a few private garden tours, too. They can be found on the National Garden Scheme website (www.ngs.org.uk).

ny times over the years, believes the hard work her group put in it was all worthwhile. "I've never had more fun and been prouder of the commitment of my garden club members," she says. After all, it is Chelsea. "It was one of the greatest experiences of my life."

Marty Wingate is a garden writer and tour guide based in Seattle, Washington. She will be blogging from the Chelsea show in May; AHS members will be able to read her blog through a link on the AHS website (www.ahs.org).