



REVIEW

Chelsea Flower Show review: It's blooming late and all in the best possible taste

Stephen Anderton

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Andie McDowell with her stand of Dahlia flowers at the Chelsea flower show
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

★★★★☆ Chelsea Flower Show is like a party this year. Everyone's so glad to be back, even if it's in September and not the usual late May slot.

And September in a garden that has real verve can be one of the most colourful and exciting months of the year. So, amid the jolly pumpkins that pop up round every corner, has Chelsea 2021 got verve?

First to meet you as you head south down Main Avenue is the M&G Garden from the Harris Bugg Studio, one of many urban wildlife havens, a woodland garden with truly exquisite perennial planting, faultlessly beautiful, in a modern take on mists and mellow fruitfulness. And that, folks, is what you get pretty much all the way: a glorious, moody modern autumn. One after another, fabulous, opulent planting. Peter Chmiel's garden for the Guangzhou government got my prize for its cool simple economy and realism.



A Chelsea Pensioner admires a giant pumpkin at the show
GUY BELL/REX

Odd, though, that none of the show gardens ventured to do loud autumn colour. Call it good taste, call it timidity, call it an obsession with the wild look, but none dared to do anything actually, joyously Septemberishly colourful.

Ann-Marie Powell's trade stand for Gaze Burvill's oak garden furniture was effectively the most colourful and happiest garden in the show.

If you do loud there is always the risk of being vulgar of course, but vulgar done with panache can be brilliant; it is, however, difficult to do well. I hope the RHS will consider another September show, with more notice, so designers can let their hair down.

There were balcony gardens this year, offering a welcome lesson for many a visitor and they are full of ideas to steal, from formal to naturalistic. And there was a whole new class of container gardens. People will love John McPherson's tiny Pop Street Garden, complete with spray mural, rugs and planting in painted cans and boxes. Much cooler was The Hot Tin Roof, an urban beach garden, crisp and stylish, in greens and creams with an outdoor shower surrounded by ferns, fatsias and grasses. Delicious.

In the great marquee the stands are inevitably fewer this year but visitors need not worry.

There is, finally, the space to breathe, which everyone has wanted for years and which ought to make moving around between the exhibits a pleasure rather than a battle. This might just turn out to be "that really nice year".

Plants on show under cover always have an almost surreal out-of-season timelessness, but this time there are real-time lipstick-loud nerines, cracking cannas and dazzling dahlias. And don't miss the floral windows — it's not just for flower arrangers; Jam Jar Edit's backlit glass pressed-flower screen will fill their order book.