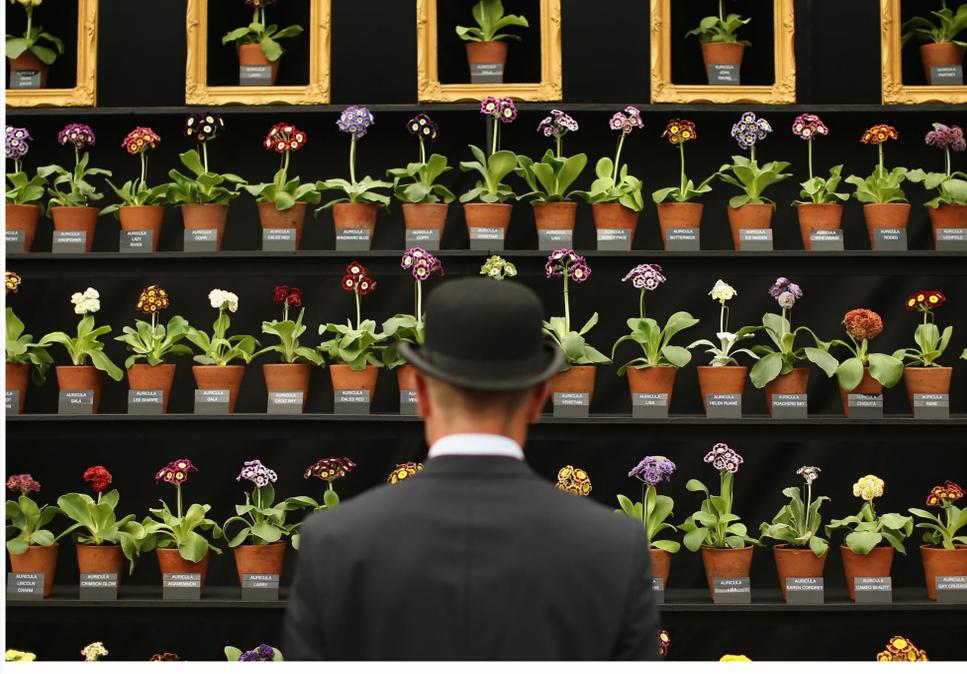


# Scents and sensibility

Going to the Chelsea Flower Show? You'll need to read this survivor's guide.

By CHRISTINE MCCABE



An exhibitor in the Great Pavilion at a previous Chelsea Flower Show. Picture: Getty Images

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7 MINUTE READ

I am sitting in a pretty marquee at a table set with white linen and flowers, enjoying a glass of champagne and pot of tea served in pale blue Wedgwood.

Before me are finger sandwiches of Loch Duart smoked salmon and rare roast Hereford beef, and dainty floral-themed cakes, including a rose and raspberry Battenberg, lavender eclair and tiny St Clements cake topped with a little ladybird.

It's rather early for afternoon tea but 11.30am is the only booking I could secure in The Drawing Room at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show three months out. At previous shows I went the entire day without eating or sitting down; queues at food vans were dispiritingly long and every wall and patch of lawn was occupied. Savvy locals bring their own sandwiches, and a plastic bag or sheet to sit on because showers are inevitable and the ground gets damp.

But after several visits I'm beginning to get the hang of Chelsea. For keen gardeners, or even those with just a passing interest in gardening, this famous spring flower show, held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea in west London every May, is the Oscars of the horticultural world, glamorous, fashion-forward and a serious sensory overload (don't forget to pack your antihistamines).

[MORE: Watch highlights of the 2019 RHS Chelsea Flower Show](#)

Gardening is part of the very warp and weft of England's green and pleasant land but it's not until you visit Chelsea, established by the Royal Horticultural Society in 1913, that you realise how deep this love of gardening runs. Being in London for Chelsea week is a little like being in Melbourne for the Cup. Everyone seems to be in on the action: the Queen (apparently Chelsea is one of her favourite events) and other royalty, music stars, actors and plenty of Aussie green thumbs keen to visit the mecca of global gardening. The show spills out to embrace nearby streets and neighbourhoods, with shops and restaurants setting up elaborate floral displays and the Chelsea Fringe providing associated events and plenty of guerilla gardening action.

In a history of Chelsea I unearth in an op shop, penned by the charmingly named Hester Marsden-Smedley, the author explains that in the show's early years even industrial disputes, and skirmishes by the likes of the suffragettes, couldn't dampen the country's gardening spirit. One activist, Miss Ellen Beck, "a farmer and horticulturalist in Sussex, declared that they would never disturb a Flower Show". Quite.



Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge at last year's Chelsea Flower Show. Picture: Luke MacGregor

Imbued with a similar Dig for Victory can-do, last year I planned ahead and went online to the RHS website and booked myself that early afternoon tea. It cost a hefty £70 (\$140) but was worth every penny. There are other dining options; if you're feeling really cashed up, the lovely Jardin Blanc in a quiet corner of the show offers a range of packages with menus by French chef Raymond Blanc and various activities spanning much of the day, including talks, cooking demos by the man himself and an open bar (from £372).

I am more than happy in the cheap (relatively speaking) seats. Just being able to sit for an hour or so and rest my weary feet with a cuppa and admire the glamorous gardening outfits in the room is worth the price of admission.

Chelsea forms part of the modern-day, so-called "Season", also including Royal Ascot, Wimbledon and the Goodwood Festival of Speed, so many folk dress accordingly (floral prints and pastels are recommended). I'm dressed down, think tourist chic (now there's an oxymoron), and in my comfiest walking shoes, because these are essential if you're to get through the day.



Delivering flowers to a display at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Picture: Getty Images

My advice is to arrive for opening at 8am and head straight for the big-hitter Main Avenue show gardens. Costing as much as £1 million each, these showcase the world's leading designers and create most of the media buzz (remember when Australia's Phil Johnson won best in show in 2013).

By 10am Main Avenue is so crowded it's difficult to get near these gardens; even at 8.30 there are long queues to enter the Back to Nature garden designed by the Duchess of Cambridge, the talk of the show last year.

With the show gardens done and dusted make your way to the Artisan Gardens, much smaller but often more charming and infinitely more accessible. And this year there's a couple of new categories: Urban Gardens, showing how even the smallest space can be transformed into a garden, and House Plant Studios, inspiration for apartment dwellers.

Leading author and garden editor of UK House & Garden magazine, Clare Foster, is a Chelsea veteran and says: "There has been a shift over the last couple of years at Chelsea with an influx of exciting new design talent." This year there are two show gardens she's eager to see. "The M&G Garden, designed by Hugo Bugg and Charlotte Harris, one of the most dynamic and interesting design duos working in the UK at the moment," she says. "The other is the Yeo Valley Organic Garden, designed by Tom Massey, another up-and-coming designer."



The Great Pavilion filled with visitors at last year's show. Picture: Georgi Mabee

Chelsea not only showcases designers but the world's leading growers, florists and nurseries. In the Great Pavilion, brace yourself for an onslaught of colour and scent (I suggest dipping in and out of this vast arena so as not to be overwhelmed). There are gorgeous vegetables primed and polished and arranged in towers, bathtubs filled with peonies, forests of foxgloves and clematis the size of dinner plates. From the vivid anthuriums of a Caribbean garden to the heady scent of arbors draped in lush David Austin roses, it's hard to know where to turn. Clare says to keep an eye out for Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants.

"After over 30 years of exhibiting and 24 gold medals, this well-known nursery is saying goodbye to Chelsea, so their display is bound to be spectacular," she says.

Outside the main exhibitors and across the 4.5ha site there's more to explore in the countless, and often incredibly beautiful, trade stands selling everything imaginable related to gardening: botanical art, outdoor furniture, sculpture and antique gardening tools. Kit yourself out in gardening tweed, road-test some wellies or order a life-size stag sculpture for the front lawn.

Australian-based Botanica World Discoveries includes a day at Chelsea as part of several garden-themed tours of Britain and Europe. Botanica director Judy Vanrenen is well connected in gardening circles, so Botanica guests can look forward to an evening with Rosemary Alexander, former Chelsea judge and founder of the famous English Gardening School, as well as visiting her lovely garden in Sussex.

Botanica provides access to private gardens, large and small, across London and the Home Counties, including the floating flower gardens fashioned by residents of a little village of barges tied up on the Thames opposite the Tower of London. Foxgloves, irises and full-size trees are cultivated on barge roofs and alongside the rickety walkways that connect the boats; it's an entirely magical little world.



Loseley Park in Surrey, one of the gardens visited on Botanica World Discoveries tours. Picture: Alamy

The public gardens visited by Botanica are often lesser known and might include the lovely Fulham Palace, the historic home of the bishops of London, or the walled Elizabethan garden at Loseley Park, where the 16th-century manor house has starred in *The Crown* and *Midsomer Murders*. At Chelsea, Botanica guests can either peel off from the group and explore for themselves or stick with guides, including Aussie horticulturalist Teena Crawford, an ace with plant identification.

Don't forget to pack a notebook (a Chelsea essential); you may not be able to bring any plants home but you'll get loads of ideas. Marsden-Smedley notes "an enterprising barrow boy did a fine trade on the second day of (that first) 1913 show with notebooks and well-sharpened pencils ... before he was moved on by the police".

*Christine McCabe was a guest of Botanica World Discoveries.*



A worker adjusts a display at the Chelsea Flower Show, London. Picture: Getty Images

## IN THE KNOW

Chelsea Flower Show runs five days, May 19-23, with more than 600 exhibitors. Day one is for media, VIPs and the royals. Tuesday and Wednesday are for RHS members only. It's easy to become a member online; this provides for slightly discounted show tickets and access to those members-only days. Thursday-Saturday is open to all-comers (tickets online). If you're looking ahead to next year, Botanica offers four tours featuring a day at Chelsea: 17 days taking in the gardens of the Loire Valley, Dordogne and Normandy as well as Seine River Cruise; nine days exploring the gardens of Wales and the Cotswolds; eight days in Devon, Somerset and Cornwall; and 10 days exploring the gardens of London, Sussex and Dublin, including the Dublin in Bloom show.

[rhs.org.uk](https://rhs.org.uk)

[chelseafringe.com](https://chelseafringe.com)

## MORE TO THE STORY

House & Garden editor Clare Foster's top Chelsea tips:

- Resign yourself to the fact you won't be able to see everything; plan your priorities, and then take it slowly. If you rush around, you won't take everything in. Be mindful, focus on the detail, and you'll come away feeling like you have gained much more from the experience.

- Either get there super-early or stay late. Be that person who is standing waiting for the gates to open at 8am, and revel in the hour before the main rush starts. Alternatively, have an early lunch at Sloane Square and then saunter in while everyone else is eating, avoiding all the food queues. The show doesn't finish until 8pm, so aim to stay right until the end, as the crowds tend to disperse around 6pm.

- Talk to people. All gardeners love sharing their knowledge, so ask as many questions as you like of the exhibitors, whether designers, growers or retailers, and you'll come away feeling horticulturally enriched.