

Chelsea Flower Show 2023: Harris Bugg's Garden for a Good Cause Wins Best in Show

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Sometimes, it's the garden that people quietly admire at the **Chelsea Flower Show** that wins Best in Show, confounding the prognosticators. That happened this year with a garden designed by young-yet-seasoned landscape studio **Harris Bugg** for the spinal injury garden charity, **Horatio's**. The charity's raison d'être is to provide quality outdoor space to patients in wheelchairs or on beds at the 11 hospitals in the UK that have spinal injury units, giving them a place of calm and a degree of privacy in a hospital setting. Each is designed to a very high spec by leading garden designers, and Harris Bugg's Best in Show winner at Chelsea is the beginning of what will be the eighth Horatio's Garden, in Sheffield.

This year, the most talked-about show gardens were probably Cleve West's Centrepoint garden highlighting the plight facing young homeless people and **Sarah Price's garden** based on the horticultural legacy of artist (and plant breeder) Cedric Morris. On press day, people were coming away from the Price garden saying that it was the most beautiful thing they'd ever seen at Chelsea. And yet—when all the judges' points were tallied, Harris Bugg's garden had done everything right and more.



Above: "Chelsea is a stop on the way to somewhere else." Former spinal injury patients actor George Robinson and tv presenter Ade Adepitan share a joke on the Horatio's Garden at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Increasingly, judges have been putting value on a garden's afterlife when the show finishes. This garden is not an evocation; the outbuilding is real, and it needed to be big enough for rotating a wheeled bed. "The garden is designed to be fit for purpose, to take apart and put back together again," explains Charlotte Harris of Harris Bugg Studio. It will transform what is currently a parking lot at the Princess Royal Spinal Cord Injuries Centre in Sheffield. The show garden is 72-feet by 33; the future garden will be eight times that size. Everything here will be moved lock, stock, and barrel excluding the lower story of plants, which will be sold off (for the charity).



Above: River birch and pleasantly named *Aruncus* 'Horatio' around a shingled outdoor shelter.

It's a difficult brief for a show garden, to bring theater to practicalities. Paving had to be completely smooth, without joints and on a flat gradient. Harris Bugg wanted to avoid using pollutants and have managed to produce a terrazzo paving that is non-bump, non-slip and permeable made from crushed and smoothed aggregate.

The garden was one of 15 gardens sponsored this year by **Project Giving Back**, a small but very focused collective who provide sponsorships for charities that would not otherwise be able to justify the cost. They provide funding for "gardens for good causes" and a PGB-sponsored garden last year also took the top prize, the "beaver garden" more properly known as the **Rewilding Britain Landscape**.



Above: About two thirds of the Horatio's Garden is covered in dappled shade, provided by river birch with its textured bark (shown here), and field maple.

The expectation for a garden for people with spinal injuries would be that it's all a certain height. Charlotte Harris broadens this: "It's not necessarily low because people coming into it have a different field of vision. We just wanted people to be able to see through the garden." It is densely planted, beneath trees that were chosen for their light canopies. Dappled shade creates a cooling atmosphere, psychologically and physically, as spinal injury patients are more likely to become overheated.



Above: Textural plantings includes *Cirsium rivulare* and *Anthriscus sylvestris* 'Ravenswing', grown for the show by Kelways. The trees have come from Deepdale and the mixed hedging is from Big Hedge Co, who will store it again while the scaled-up garden is under construction.

“We believe that Horatio’s gardens are life-changing when life is bleak,” says co-founder Dr Olivia Chapple, the mother of Horatio, who died when he was a schoolboy, from an accident. It was he who first came up with the idea of creating gardens for spinal injury patients. He had done work with such patients and determined that they needed outdoor space, later taking it up with his father, a spinal surgeon, among other people. He even devised a questionnaire for patients and staff on what to put in his putative garden. Ideas behind the Harris Bugg garden for Horatio’s were also patient-led.



Above: “The idea of water is to bring wildlife, animation, and reflective qualities into the Horatio’s gardens,” says Hugo. “This design was inspired by Sheffield, City of Steel and its history of cutlery-making.”

Studded with metal press dies taken from antique cutlery, the water table references the steel-making heritage of Sheffield, future home of this garden. Very gentle rippling from the outside rim attracts birds, while the indented shapes in the dies hold still water, which bees prefer. “The water table took quite a bit of engineering,” says Charlotte Harris.



Above: One of a series of small stone cairns with *Rosa mutabilis*, a recurring motif here (and in Sarah Price's garden).

Small stone cairns dot the garden, acting as markers. “You could have a lump of stones on the floor instead,” says Charlotte. “The cairns are about way finding, and the idea that one is on a different path after a spinal injury, and other people have gone before, and can help by passing on their experiences. But also it’s a link to the Peak District and Sheffield. Plus, they give the garden winter structure.” The cairns were made by young stone wallers **Lydia and Bert Noble**.



Above: The outdoor shelter is designed by McMullan Studio and is wide enough for turning a hospital bed, without looking too big for the garden.

Inside the building, vignette windows of different heights look out on to woodland planting. The garden is also scattered with lightweight **Luxembourg chairs** by Fermob, and flower pots on wheels. “It’s basically a patient-centered garden,” says Charlotte. “So, if I’m in a bed or a wheelchair, I define where I want to be, and the furniture can be moved, and the props can be moved around.”



Above: Industrial-look pots are made of sprayed, recycled plastic on wheels.

The paving is truly innovative—permeable, with a bump-free finish, and grip rather than sheen. Its contents are crushed waste (old bricks, leftover limestone paving offcuts) held together with a cement-free binding. It is modular so that it can be moved to Sheffield but the joints are invisible. The pots are easily moved around to accommodate visitors and patients' movements. All of these features are practical ideas that the judges clearly loved.

See also: