

STEEL BOOTS, SLEEPLESS NIGHTS AND A SULKING TREE

The world's most famous flower show takes place in London this month. HUGO BUGG reflects on what it means to be involved in the Chelsea Flower Show, as both designer and judge



Horatio's Garden by Hugo Bugg and Charlotte Harris won Best in Show at Chelsea in 2023.
Photo: Marianne Majerus

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here are certain mornings that stay with you for years. For me, many of them begin on the Embankment in early May, cycling towards the Chelsea showground in steel boots and a high-vis jacket, long before the commuters appear.

My first Chelsea garden was in 2014, and I remember the heat. For all the anxiety about cold springs and reluctant plants, it always seemed that the moment build began, the sun arrived. Stepping onto the site felt surreal: diggers reversing, generators humming and hundreds of people assembling show gardens and nursery displays. In those early weeks it is all noise and machinery, but as construction finishes and plants arrive the showground gradually transforms from building site to

garden. Looking back, I realise how much I didn't know. Bespoke elements arrived on site having never been assembled, and we were fortunate it all worked. It was a stressful way to learn that at Chelsea there is no time for indecision.

Trees, in particular, have a habit of humbling you. They anchor a garden and define its character, but they are also temperamental. In 2014 one of my central alders simply refused to leaf properly after being transplanted. By the Saturday before judging we had to decide whether to remove it or risk building the garden around a sulking tree. We took it out. However much you prepare, nature always has the final word.

What people often don't see is the scale of effort behind a show garden. From the first sketch to judging day can easily span two years. There is the design, the RHS selection process, sponsorship, growing plants and sourcing trees, fabricating elements off site, winter pre-assembly, and then finally four intense weeks on the showground. By the time the public arrive, the garden represents the work of dozens, sometimes over a hundred people: nurseries nurturing plants, specialist craftspeople, contractors, volunteers, designers and sponsors.

Judging morning, as a designer, is a nerve-racking experience. You have two minutes to explain your garden. Two years distilled into one short conversation. Then you leave the judges to inspect and debate it, and suddenly it is out of your hands. That moment, when you realise you can do no more, is strangely peaceful.

'Chelsea shows you what gardens can be. Devon reminds you why you love them'



Hugo presents to the judges for his 2014 show garden. Photo: Chris Christoloudou



Last minute preparations on the 2014 garden. Photo: Chris Christoloudou



Hugo's first Chelsea garden in 2014. Photo: Chris Christoloudou

This year I will experience Chelsea from the other side of the fence. Having judged the balcony gardens last year, I have been invited to judge the Main Avenue gardens. It is a huge privilege, and a serious responsibility.

Before becoming a judge, I perhaps didn't fully appreciate how rigorous the process is. There are clear criteria covering everything from the realisation of the brief to planting design and construction quality. Judging panels debate carefully and thoroughly. It is not a quick walk-through and a casual opinion. Gardens are discussed at length, sometimes for over an hour, until consensus is reached.

Chelsea itself has evolved significantly since my first garden in 2014. There is now a stronger emphasis on sustainability, reuse and relocation, with many gardens designed from the outset to live on elsewhere. The Horatio's Garden we designed in 2023, for example, was always intended to move to Sheffield after the show, with materials, planting and construction planned with that future setting in mind. Increasingly, gardens are more climate-aware, more naturalistic in planting style, and more tolerant of seasonal variation. A few insect-nibbled leaves are no longer seen as a flaw, but simply as part of nature.

Project Giving Back has also brought a different spirit to Chelsea. One of the conditions of securing funding is that every garden must have a permanent home after the show, which has significantly strengthened the legacy of many Chelsea gardens. Increasingly, they exist not just for the week of the show, but for a longer life afterwards, supporting charities and communities. Seeing the garden rebuilt in Sheffield and used every day by patients with spinal injuries has been deeply moving. It is a powerful reminder that gardens can genuinely change lives.



Hugo and Charlotte's 2023 garden won Best in Show. Photo: Oliver Dixon Photography

'Chelsea is intense and demanding... Yet it offers something rare: the chance to immerse yourself completely in making, in collaboration, and in celebrating plants and the people who grow them'

Post-Covid there was also a renewed appreciation of green space. The 2021 autumn show, which Charlotte Harris and I designed together for M&G, felt charged with emotion. The planting had a burnished, seasonal quality and people seemed to experience it with heightened gratitude. That garden, built from reclaimed materials and designed as a pocket park, reflected a shift towards more inclusive and adaptable urban green space. In some ways the concept was quite daring for Chelsea, bringing the idea of a shared urban space to the showground rather than a private garden.

One of my favourite parts of the show remains the Great Pavilion. On the quiet Saturday and Sunday before opening, you can wander among extraordinary nursery displays, discovering plants you have never grown or seeing familiar ones used differently.

It is also a chance to talk with the growers themselves, true experts in their fields, and

there is always something new to learn. Alongside the Main Avenue gardens, I particularly enjoy the All About Plants gardens, where designers collaborate closely with specialist nurseries to create wonderfully experimental planting combinations.

One that caught my attention when reading through this year's preview is The Missing Collector, inspired by Plant Heritage's Missing Collections campaign. The concept imagines a mysterious plant enthusiast who has left behind an extraordinary botanical archive, revealed through jewel-toned plants emerging from lush green foliage. It promises intriguing cultivars of plants such as *Thalictrum*, *Polypodium* and *Aspidistra*.

Chelsea is intense and demanding, often disrupting studio life and family routines. Yet it offers something rare: the chance to immerse yourself completely in making, in collaboration, and in celebrating plants and the people who grow them. As I walk onto

Main Avenue this year as a judge, I will carry with me memories of steel boots, sleepless nights, triumphs and difficult decisions, and above all what it feels like to stand behind a garden you have given everything to.

But I will also be looking forward to the journey home. There is something quietly wonderful about stepping off the train in Devon in late May and remembering what full, unhurried green looks like. After a week among gardens engineered to perfection, the lanes here are doing something altogether less considered, cow parsley drifting at the verges, hedgerows thick and tangled, the whole landscape in full, generous bloom. Chelsea shows you what gardens can be. Devon reminds you why you love them. ●

Hugo is a garden designer, co-founder of Harris Bugg Studio and Devon Gardens Trust trustee. He works across the South West and beyond and is a *Devon Life* columnist.