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The Gardening World Cup: The ultimate garden design challenge

Sally Nex on the garden show that pushes designers to the limit

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Lim in Chong's show garden 'Eye to Eye' at the Gardening World Cup 2012.

Photograph: Lim in Chong

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Right. You've got 10 days to build a show garden. I'm giving you £50,000, a team of Japanese contractors and a translator. You're up against some of the best designers in the world, so your reputation is on the line. Oh yes: and you're doing it on the other side of the world.

No wonder the designers say entering the [Gardening World Cup](#) in Nagasaki, Japan, is more [Challenge Anneka](#) than [Chelsea](#). This year's clash of the garden design titans has been so popular with the public it's been extended by a fortnight (it ends next weekend), and in all my years of going to flower shows I can honestly say I've never been anywhere quite like it.

For starters, I may have thought I was in Japan, but essentially I spent the week in Holland. The venue, [Huis Ten Bosch](#), is a faithful reproduction of the Dutch Royal Family's palace, complete with parterres, pleached tunnels and fountains. Only the faces were Japanese.

It's a grand setting for a show that would like to be very grand indeed. The GWC dubs itself the Japanese Chelsea Flower Show, and that's not entirely swagger. If you hand-pick twelve designers from the best in the world (previous alumni include Chelsea winners [Andy Sturgeon](#) and [Sarah Eberle](#)) the result is something special. Which makes it all the more strange

how you keep coming up with parallels from the world of TV game shows. Never mind Challenge Anneka: there's more than a passing resemblance to [Ready, Steady, Cook](#).

The designers were all interpreting the same theme – 'Peace and Restoration', about as resonant in bomb-shadowed Nagasaki as anywhere. And the 10 days include sourcing all the plants: every nursery for miles around was stripped bare. So everyone began with the same initial ingredients, but with radically different results.

The dancing plumes of annual knotweed [Persicaria orientalis](#), for example, were dignified in 'Eye to Eye', a breathtaking Islamic garden by Malaysian designer Lim in Chong (can someone tell me why we never see Islamic [gardens](#) at UK flower shows?). Its cool blue-and-white tiled floor and star-shaped pool among serene roses and cosmos stole the show, winning gold and best garden.

But in 'The Butterfly Effect' by Jo Thompson, fresh from her Chelsea debut (though sadly minus [Doris the caravan](#)), the persicarias danced merrily over clouds of fuzzy [Caryopteris x clandonensis](#) in a butterfly-friendly garden enclosed within Tuscan-style stone arches.

The caryopteris turned cool English in [Richard Miers'](#) elegantly sophisticated outdoor dining area, but were a single pool of muted colour on multiple Chelsea gold medal winner [Kazuyuki Ishihara's](#) Zen-like Japanese tea house garden with its single pine stooping gracefully to kiss the water's surface.

Several bemused contractors were dispatched to dig up lipstick-pink nerine lookalike [Lycoris radiata](#), a local weed, from neighbouring rice paddies. David Davidson, designer of Kirstenbosch's [acclaimed exhibits at Chelsea](#), kept them wild in a sea of purple [Panicum virgatum](#)'Chocolata' beneath the parched bones of a magnolia to evoke apartheid South Africa, but for [Karen Stefonick](#), from the US, they were shocking splashes of colour in a pared-down garden backed by twin rippled concrete walls and a single orange sun-like orb.

The theme, too, provoked quirky, original responses. 'Dulce et Decorum Est' by [James Basson](#), a Brit living in France, was a thought-provoking depiction of a bullet ripping through concrete, while Korea's [Jihae Hwang](#) (another much-admired Chelsea veteran) brought a tender garden about the humility of poverty, with exquisite details like its row of tiny Korean shoes under a bench.

Jo Thompson, who went through all this last year, told me doing the GWC is like childbirth: once it's over you forget how monumentally difficult it was and start wanting to do it again. Now I've recovered from the epic jetlag and my coffee intake is back to normal, I'm beginning to think the same thing myself.

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