

LIFE GARDENING CHELSEA 2013

SHOW'S
EARLY
STARS

As ever with the Chelsea Flower Show, you want to seek out those gardens that excite, inspire and really lift your heart.

Excellence in design, be it some clever small detail or a wonderful space, is always enjoyable. In a good year, there are usually at least a handful of such elements that enthral me. I viewed the show last Thursday, when it was still very much a building site rather than a flower show. I did get a good flavour of what will unfold in the next three days of manic activity.

Of the 15 show gardens, here, in no particular order, are my early favourites.

1 The Telegraph Garden

Christopher Bradley-Hole's garden was one that definitely stood out. The whole mood, style and feel had a timeless charm to it. It would translate brilliantly into many spaces and would be wonderful to live with.

The bulk of the structural planting consists of rectangular and L-shaped blocks of hedging: yew, box and hornbeam. These are cut at precise heights, the yew all 120mm taller than the box and 150mm shorter than the hornbeam. While I was there, they were measuring them with a laser level and using tiny scissors to get them exact. These blocks formed a stunning but simple patternwork.

The planting overall looked sublime, and unlike many Chelsea gardens would look pretty strong in February, too. Cow parsley was included, which would drive me mad with its rampagous nature, but maybe the far better-natured and beautiful Baltic parsley (which I spied on his Danish trolleys) was not available in significant enough quantities. The specimen hazel trees were grown on a leg – that is to say, on a single trunk about 300mm high before it branches. It is hard to grow like this – you have to keep removing the branches that develop. Sometimes it is grown on longer legs so they can put squirrel guards around the

BUNNY GUINNESS

Perennial wisdom

A preview of this year's field yields some inspiring moments and a range of budding standouts



trunk to prevent the rodents leaping up and stealing the crop, but Christopher chose them because they look far more special like this, as it is so rarely done. The oak colonnade running on two sides is the only real access to the garden, so it is a garden to enjoy visually more than physically. The wall behind the colonnade is made of charred oak boarding – the charring brings out the resins and helps preserve it.

2 The Wasteland

Kate Gould's gardens always have a lot to say for themselves. Nothing she does is predictable, and her designs are always beautifully put together.

She had a tight budget, too, as she has funded it all herself, almost unheard of today, and it puts her at a distinct disadvantage as there is little wriggle room if you make an error when there is no generous sponsor in the background. The story behind her 10m x 10m oasis was that it was an existing derelict urban space transformed into a garden using lots of waste materials. The theme may be not so new, but the effects are stunning. Kate has spent many hours foraging for the kind of things I would have walked past – more fool me. The insides of an old mattress, with the familiar double layer of springs, has been reworked to form a curving trellis screen. Some shopping trolleys were flattened and reworked to make another metal frame elsewhere. Benches were made by resting large timber tops on some big marine valves, and half a roll-top bath was to be installed as a seat. Flattened stainless-steel drums of washing machines formed a modern wall sculpture, and the structural paving and walling was predominantly formed from reclaimed concrete – this involves smashing up old concrete and using it as the dry aggregate for new concrete. It was then poured, and Kate formed simple patterns in the surface while wet to add simple decoration. High green walls of *Pachysandra terminalis* were worked in between corrugated iron sheet, or wriggly tin. Crazy paving was laid with a wide joint and was shortly to be filled with moss.

4 After the Fire: Cancer Research garden

James Basson's garden (Scape Design) is a small one (9m x 9m) that caught my eye. It's a strong, simple design with informal plantings of myrtles,

phillyrea, cistus, arbutus and other Mediterranean-style plants arranged with the supposed remnants of burned trees cleverly positioned among them. Hard-packed earth paths crossed through in places, and a gully of orange terracotta traversed the space running to an earth-baked pool. The terracotta was all done by Poterie Le Chêne Vert, and was different, dashing and delightful (poteriedanduze.com).

Lots of impact here, but subtle too.

