

Blood, sweat and tears: a grower's perspective

The road to Chelsea can be rocky, characterised by weather worries and timing issues. By *Jekka McVicar*

In January most sensible gardeners are curled up with seed catalogues planning their gardens for the following year. Conversely, growers for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show are frantically busy. As I write, it is only 19 weeks until the 2015 event and, although I should not worry, I do. Every year is a challenge. I started exhibiting at Chelsea in 1993, naive about the hard graft that was involved in this amazing show. I was also unaware that it was the beginning of a long-lasting, love-hate relationship.

Chelsea is always a challenge because

it is in late May, which is early in the growing calendar. Over the past two decades the weather has become more unpredictable.

For example, last year we had a mild winter and therefore little protection was needed, but it meant that pests and disease were rampant.

This year, I have no idea what the final throes of winter will bring. Before Christmas it was unseasonably warm, at 10C during the night and then, during the same week, the temperature fell until it became the coldest night of 2014.

I have no method to manipulate or combat the unpredictable weather: no hot houses and no way of forcing or holding plants. The result is that all my displays and the plants I grow for Chelsea are what the season permits.

If I'm lucky, Chelsea designers give me a year to grow the plants they want, but it is now normal to get only nine

months. This means planning and timing are paramount. It also means a certain amount of gambling because I have to predict what will be needed for the following year's Chelsea before the designers have even been chosen.

A classic example is *Angelica archangelica*, which is required this year for the Homebase garden designed by Adam Frost.

This is a remarkably difficult herb to time for Chelsea as it is monocarpic, which means that the plant dies after flowering, so it is hard to know until the spring if it will flower in time for the show.

Things are made more difficult by the fact that we have to grow the plants for a minimum of two years before they are planted. The final complication for this plant is the weather: if the winter is cold and the spring warm we are guaranteed to have some 8ft beauties. In different

Seedlings ready to be planted

David Page Photography/Alamy



weather conditions they will have masses of leaves and no flower.

For the L'Occitane garden designed by James Basson, we have to grow plants as they would be seen in the wild. This is particularly difficult for me as I am known for producing ebullient plants, in

'Why do I keep growing for this show? The challenge of working with nature to produce Chelsea's jewels'

flower. Basson is insistent that last year's flowers must not be cut off.

Therefore, I must not tweak, feed or pamper. It has proved to be the biggest challenge yet, as mildew will attack dying old flowers and spread to neighbouring plants, so, with my snips in my

back pocket, I regularly inspect and remove any that are infected.

To combat this risk and produce "wild" plants, we spend many hours moving plants outside if the weather is mild, or inside if it is too windy, wet or cold, which is an excellent workout regime based on the weather's vagaries.

Why do I still keep growing for this one show? Put simply, it is the challenge of working with nature to produce the jewels of Chelsea.

So next time you stare at one of the amazing Chelsea gardens, stop and think about the plants and the skill and patience it took the grower to get them there, on time, in perfect order — for the best flower show in the world.

Jekka McVicar is an organic gardening expert and runs Jekka's Herb Farm in Alveston, Gloucestershire, winner of 14 gold medals at Chelsea