

From Chatsworth to a cosmic mystery, gardeners' creativity blooms in Chelsea

Prizes for Observer writer's homage to Derbyshire estate - and a representation of dark matter

Peter Walker

The large crowds around Dan Pearson's ambitious reimagining of the grounds at Chatsworth House for the Chelsea flower show would be advised to enjoy his creation while they can: after winning the award for best show garden, Pearson said he might never return.

"There won't be a next time. I really don't think I will come back," Pearson told the Guardian from his rock-strewn, naturalistic site, which includes 10 truckloads of stone shipped 160 miles from a quarry in Derbyshire. He then

The coveted gold medals awarded by the Royal Horticultural Society attract entries from across the world



paused: "I might, you know. I've said that before."

But it could be a while. Pearson's Chatsworth homage, an amalgamation and re-creation of a rocky and trout stream at the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's estate, is his first appearance at Chelsea for 11 years, and he said it would be years before he thinks of trying again.

The Observer gardening columnist said: "I think I've said something about the way I'm planting at the moment, and where I'm looking at space, and I won't come back for some time, if I even do come back. I feel you need some time to recharge with some new energy."

The garden, which took two years

to plan and 18 "very intensive days" to build, almost never happened after, at one point, Thames Water engineers said the plans could place too much strain on a Victorian sewer running under the site. "It was quite ambitious," Pearson said. "At certain points, we felt very intrepid."

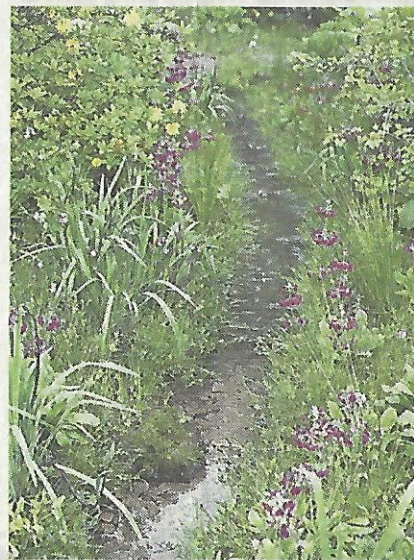
"One of the planters arrived and saw the site on the first day and she said to me, 'Dan, what were you thinking?' So we had T-shirts with that on printed up for the whole team."

On a packed first public day, punctuated by heavy showers and spells of bright sunshine, at the central London event yesterday, Pearson's huge, triangular creation was a clear highlight for visitors.

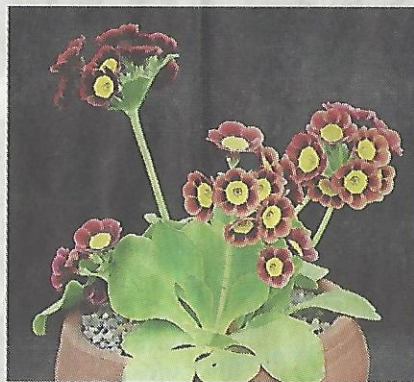
"It's so impressive, especially the way he recreates nature," said Judith Glover, who once tended a small north London garden but has transplanted to a bigger plot in Suffolk. "It's really hard to do - it's not just knowing what to plant, it's knowing what to leave alone," added Linette Ralph, her friend and former London neighbour.

Equally innovative was the smaller installation that took the award for best fresh garden, the grandly titled Dark Matter Garden, which aims to do nothing less than explain the secrets of the universe.

It was designed by Howard Miller in conjunction with Prof Michael Bode, who heads the Astrophysics Research Institute at Liverpool John Moores University. Bode is involved with the National Schools' Observatory, an educational trust that tries to interest children in the wonders of the cosmos.



A stream meanders through designer Dan Pearson's winning garden entry



A Primula auricula entered for judging in one of the floral categories

Bode, whose previous gardening expertise was mainly growing vegetables, began by advising on a prize-winning galaxy-themed garden at the Royal Horticultural Society's Tatton Park show in Cheshire two years ago.

"We sat in the tent on the last day in the rain thinking, what shall we do next?" Bode explained. "I said, 'What about Chelsea? And what if the theme was dark matter?' I didn't know how we would interpret this."

The eventual design is based on a European Space Agency diagram of how dark matter - which cannot be seen but is believed to make up much of the universe - can be detected by the way light bends round it.

In the garden, light is represented by long metal rods that curve elegantly around plants, standing in for something more grand than usual. "This giant bamboo represents a cluster of galaxies," said Bode, pointing at one element.

The medal for best artisan garden went to the Sculptor's Picnic Garden, by Graham Bode, featuring a woodland theme including oak branches shaped like stag antlers.

Among the gold medal winners was A Perfumer's Garden in Grasse by James Basson, which seeks to "represent the history of the perfume industry".

One of the more predictable elements of the day's prizegiving came when a Hampshire-based nursery was handed a gold medal in the Great Pavilion awards. With its 70th consecutive such prize, Hillier nurseries is the most successful exhibitor in the history of the 102-year-old show.



James Basson sits inside A Perfumer's Garden in sse. His design won a gold medal at the RHS Chelsea flower show in London Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/Reuters