

CALL OF THE WILD

Royalty, celebrities, razzmatazz... but Chelsea's Best Show Garden was a stunning slice of nature, says Stephen Lacey

I'm chuffed to bits," said Marcus Barnett, on hearing on Monday of his gold medal for the *Telegraph* Garden. "And it's really great for all the talented people who have been working on the garden with me. Phew, a relief too. Now I can relax and enjoy the rest of the week."

My first stop at the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show was the RHS shop to buy an umbrella. But then the sun came out and, as Marcus promised, his multi-stemmed osmanthus trees cast beautiful shadows on the walls, and his blood-red 'Couleur Cardinal' tulips took on their satin sheen.

"A tremendously smart garden – for a rich couple with no children. Really well done," said landscape architect Tom Stuart-Smith.

"Marcus's plants are wonderfully integrated into the design, and the whole thing is delivered very professionally," declared Robert Hillier, one of the judges.

I agreed with a member of the public commenting that it felt the most intimate and inviting garden at the show, and with another that it would have been nice to view it from above for the full Mondrian experience. It would also have been good if his peonies had been open, but this has been a cold, late spring. I did manage to get an aerial view of the Laurent-Perrier Chatsworth garden by clambering up the rocks, where at the summit there is the surprise of a circular well pool fringed in sweet woodruff. From the swooning reactions on Monday, there was little doubt

that Dan Pearson's magical wild garden was going to win the Best Show Garden award. It is indeed a masterpiece from a designer at the top of his game.

"You just can't imagine the work that has gone into it, and yet Dan makes it look so easy. Not a single rock has even been scratched. You would swear it had always been there," said judge Dougal Philip.

"He has caught the spirit of Chatsworth beautifully," the Duke of Devonshire told me. "But taking the legacy and moving it on, as Joseph Paxton moved it on in the past."

Dan's originality and bravery is in carrying Chelsea horticulture into such an extreme naturalism, where a laburnum is shown still leafless and yellow azaleas are displayed with

dead, lichen-encrusted branches and deer-munched trunks. "He challenges your idea of what a garden is," Piet Oudolf commented.

Not all members of the public are impressed. "Add a few beer bottles and fag packets, and it could be the side of a motorway," one said. I encouraged him to take a closer look – the orchids in the rough grass, the velvet-leaved hydrangeas against the rocks... everything in its correct niche.

"Dan often talks about coming to Chelsea when he was young and being inspired by Beth Chatto. Here, he has moved that emotion, plant knowledge and ecology outdoors into one of the biggest gardens we

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have ever seen. Breathtaking,” said plantswoman Tania Compton.

James Basson’s garden for L’Occitane, also on a wild theme, I found equally seductive. He conceived a space that had once been a parcel of agricultural land, then had become a garden and is now romantically succumbing to nature. But he has set it all in the south of France, in the perfume capital of Grasse, and the plants are those of a perfumer’s garden – among them figs, roses, blackcurrant (cassis), and *Osmanthus fragrans*, which has apricot-scented flowers – all placed around a typical stone water channel and with the hazy lime-green flowers of woad dancing among them. A gem.

My two favourite gardens in the small Artisan category happen to be at the rustic end of the spectrum, too – Serena Fremantle and Tina Vallis’s A Trugmaker’s Garden and Graham Bodle’s The Sculptor’s Picnic Garden – but Andy Sturgeon was right to point out that this year’s gardens are actually, more varied than we have seen for a while: “Gardens have been looking samey but we seem to be shaking that off at this show with modernist, Islamic, naturalistic and polished all on display.” In the Fresh category, Ann-Marie Powell was enthusing about Howard Miller’s Dark Matter garden “with wonderful visual axes and surprises”.

I loved the suspended platforms of meticulously hand-cut slate in Darren Hawkes’s Brewin Dolphin garden, the rusty-coloured wallflowers and yellow aloes washed through Matt Keightley’s Sentebale garden, the waterfalls and cascades of orchids in John Tan and Raymond Toh’s Hidden Beauty of Kranji garden, and the battlefield spikes in Andrew Wilson and Gavin McWilliam’s Waterloo-inspired Living Legacy garden which, rather incongruously, were being used as singing perches by a robin.

In the Great Pavilion, there was quite a bit of warbling around Sarah Cook’s exhibit of bearded irises, bred by the artist Sir Cedric Morris, which were on the brink of being lost to horticulture. Compared with the haute couture of modern irises – immaculately presented on Claire Austin’s stand for example – these are old world beauties, coming in a range of delectable, muted and hard to describe colours (fudge-yellow? Damsons and cream?). East Anglian artist-plantsman John Morley, who I bumped into as I circled the exhibit, seemed smitten. They will be more widely available from next year.

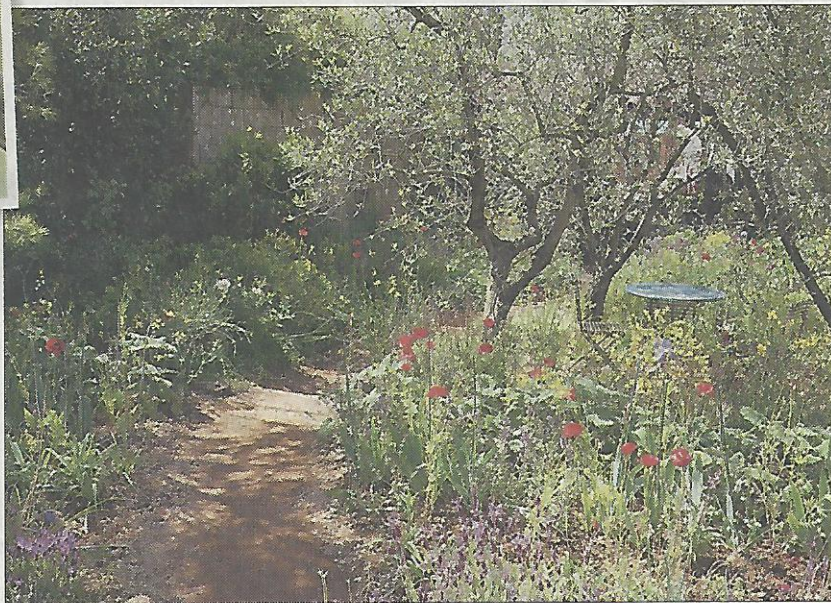
Fergus Garrett of Great Dixter enthused about the Tale Valley Nursery Momentum stand, which features an array of shade-loving foliage perennials such as hairy *Bergenia ciliata* – exceedingly handsome but in my garden has proved painfully slow to expand beyond their initial clump. I found other interesting shade-lovers on the fine exhibit staged by the Kent Group of the Hardy Plant Society – *Epimedium* ‘Pink Champagne’, which



JULIAN SIMMONDS, HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY, GAP PHOTOS/F



Prize-winning efforts: clockwise from top, the Queen meets designer Marcus Barnett on the Telegraph's gold medal garden; a scented paradise in L'Occitane's Perfumer's Garden by James Basson; *Disporum* 'Night Heron'



This year's gardens are more varied than we have seen for a while

has strawberry-coloured stars, and a couple of *disporums* (perennials resembling Solomon's seal which Dan is using in rock crevices in the Chatsworth garden), one with maroon stems and creamy yellow flowers called *D. longistylum* 'Night Heron' and another with green flowers and stems called *D. longistylum* 'Green Giant'.

The entries on the Plant of the Year stand are a great deal more appealing

than last year's. Ian Hodgson, former editor of *The Garden*, was full of praise for the winner, which he already grows – a tiered lacecap viburnum called *V. plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Kilimanjaro Sunrise' which, unlike its cousins, retains a tight conical shape as it grows, making it suitable for small gardens. It was submitted by Burncoose Nurseries who have staged a cracking exhibit, speared by a few giant lilies

(*Cardiocrinum*) of impressive stature, though sadly not in flower.

However, my attention was caught more by the Plant of the Year runners-up, especially a luscious new salvia presented by Dyson's Nurseries with large purple blooms and burgundy calyces. Its name? 'Love and Wishes'. Yuck. *Rehmannia* 'Walberton's Magic Dragon', submitted by Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants, and with large pink-pouched flowers, also looks desirable.

Outside, I was intrigued by an unusual maroon-brown pea-flowered perennial dotted through grasses. It turned out to be a new baptisia called 'Dutch Chocolate' and it featured in the Cloudy Bay Garden. This gold medal winner, designed by Harry and David Rich, gave me my Chelsea highlight this year: the Rich Bros let me have a ride in their glass and oak pavilion (the "shack on a track") which, at the press of a button, travels through the garden over tapestries of low grasses, thymes and alchemilla. It takes four passengers and even at full speed (3mph) it is beautifully smooth, though there was a sticky moment on a turning circle when we went unexpectedly into reverse and looked to be about to join the guests in Adam Frost's Homebase garden through the hedge.

Actually, I wouldn't have minded at all if the momentum had kept us gliding on up Main Avenue. Amazingly, no one has yet made an offer for it.