

'It's not supposed to be pretty': the Chelsea Flower Show garden modelled on a Maltese quarry



View of the railway sleeper table in James Basson's garden for M&G CREDIT: CLARA MOLDEN

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James Basson's garden for M&G Investments is one of the boldest and most arresting seen at Chelsea for many years: a great chunk of limestone quarry with exposed walls and scattered stone blocks, infiltrated by wild plants and presided over by gnarled old trees and broad stone stacks soaring up to 26ft.

It is from Malta that James has taken his inspiration. Since childhood, he has immersed himself in the Mediterranean and its ecology. His English parents moved to Monaco when he was a teenager, and he spent his school holidays sailing the coastline and exploring the hills.

After a garden design course at the University of Greenwich and a spell learning about Mediterranean gardening in Grasse, he set up business in the South of France, “labouring, putting up fences and digging pools, until gradually I developed from being a garden maker to a designer”. At the

same time, he and his wife, Helen, who runs his office, were bringing up three young children.

Now in his mid-40s (he turns 45 this week), James has become well known internationally for his naturalistic and sustainable Mediterranean evocations both at garden shows and out in the real world. His 2013 Chelsea garden, *After the Fire*, which showed native plants regenerating among blackened soil and tree trunks following a wildfire, had me and many others awestruck. The meticulous research behind the design was obvious, and the realism electrifying. “We funded this garden ourselves, and are still paying it off,” he says. “But it won Best in Show in the Fresh category, and put us on the map.”

‘The quarry is not supposed to be pretty. It is stark and monumentally brutal’ - James Basson

Since then, he has twice scooped Chelsea gold for his previous sponsor, L'Occitane: one garden set around a dry stream and lavender field, and another around the wispy herbs and grasses of an old country goat path.

To watch his ideas maturing for this year’s Chelsea, I had the chance – back in the summer of 2015 – to go to Malta with him and Helen, together with Mark Fane and Peter Clay of the online nursery Crocus, which was to build the garden. A quarry on the Maltese island of Gozo was what had first sparked his excitement. “I am fanatical about quarries anyway,” he says. “The cleanliness and purity of them can be like a contemporary building. I love the graphic patterns of the blocks, the scouring marks, and the way nature regenerates after man has left. A client told me about this one, and when I had the chance of coming to Malta for a design job, I came to see it and was blown away.”



James Basson in the M&G Garden CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY

He led us on a long, slow trek over a hill and there it was. Jaws dropped. Worked on for centuries, it was stupendous in scale – massive bare cliffs and stacks towering above us like the walls of Petra or one of the great pyramids. Labourers have spent so long here that they have planted vines and fruit trees for food and shade. Conjuring up this vision at Chelsea would be unforgettable.

To learn about the Maltese flora – comprising more than 1,000 species including some 23 endemics – James made contact with local botanist Stephen Mifsud (who, with local nursery Gaia, subsequently helped source seed for the garden).

Nature has a rough time in the Maltese archipelago, birds as well as plants. But on the lip of the coast by Dwerja Bay, we left development and agriculture behind and followed Stephen among the low rocks and sun-baked scrub, where wild cistus, euphorbia, lentiscus and squirting cucumber were interspersed with the white eremurus-like spires of bulbous Urginea. With an old look-out tower silhouetted against the sea, and lizards scuttling about, there was a wonderful raw beauty to it all.

Every few yards James would crouch down to examine some curiosity and discuss with Stephen its potential for Chelsea. Some of his selections for the show, Maltese endemics such as Euphorbia melitensis (Latin for Maltese), have required government permission to leave the island and have never been seen here previously.

James expects his 2017 garden will be “a shock” to visitors as they turn the corner into the heart of the showground. He says, “The quarry is not supposed to be pretty. It is stark and monumentally brutal.” Six articulated lorry loads of Maltese limestone were required to construct it, and six stone finishers from the Maltese firm of Halmann Vella came over to help with the build.

[The garden is about] man and nature reacting together over the course of time - James Basson

Ground level is imagined to have been originally at the quarry’s highest point, and everything below has been excavated. The high stone stacks in quarries occur either where areas of poor-quality stone have been left, or where there is a boundary between different quarry owners. On the quarry floor are the stone blocks carved and ready for removal, and a pool has been formed where rainwater might have collected on the impermeable rock below.

James’s theme, apparent to us when we visited Malta, is the vulnerability of nature, how it is damaged by man but also how it rebounds and recolonises – even in the brutal context of a quarry – both by itself and

with man's help. "This defunct quarry is one that has now been turned into a private garden, full of plants."

The soil depth and quality is different at each level, enabling James to portray Malta's differing ecological habitats. On top of the walls and stacks is the older, undisturbed vegetation. This includes shrubby species such as myrtle, cistus, silver teucrium, bay, buckthorn and the evergreen rambler rose *Rosa sempervirens* as well as fruits such as olive, fig and pomegranate.

The endemic *euphorbia* grows here too, together with *E. dendroides*, which makes clouds of lime-green and acid yellow around the Mediterranean in winter and spring before shutting down, like its Maltese cousin, leafless and skeletal, in the heat of the summer.

James's trees are carob – the seedpods



Some of the plants in James Basson's M&G Garden have never been seen before here CREDIT: HEATHCLIFF O'MALLEY



A view of James Basson's M&G garden CREDIT: CLARA MOLDEN

of which are used in Malta not only as animal feed but also as a traditional medicine for sore throats – and the aromatic mastic tree, *Pistacia lentiscus*. This is usually encountered as a shrub but it is also represented here by a massive specimen that James calls “the mother of all lentiscus”. There was panic earlier this spring when it part-defoliated in a cold snap.

On the quarry’s walls grow lacy white sea carrot (*Daucus*), wild caper, shrubby St John’s wort and the endemic Maltese forms of sea lavender (*Limonium*) and everlasting (*Helichrysum*), with silver leaves and mustard-yellow flowers. In the disturbed ground of pathways opportunistic annuals and perennials pop up, such as poppies, borage, castor oil plant, glaucous purple cerinthe and yellow tobacco flower.

In the impoverished conditions of the quarry floor, where there is little soil, airy fennels, asphodels and *Ampelodesmos mauritanicus* grasses rise up above white daisy-flowered corn chamomile, squat yellow carlina thistles and red clover-like *hedysarum*.

Many of the garden’s 300 different plant species will be familiar to British gardeners and are perfectly growable here. Others would be a challenge.

This is a garden that puts Malta and its environment in the spotlight but, for James, Malta is a microcosm of our planet. His garden, he says, is about “man and nature reacting together over the course of time” and about how important it is “to preserve the fragile balance and celebrate the wonder”.

Link: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/gardening/chelsea-flower-show/not-supposed-pretty-chelsea-flower-show-garden-modelled-maltese/>