

## **RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW**

by Laura Walker

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It's many a gardener's dream to attend the Royal Horticulture Society Chelsea Flower Show in England located just southwest of London on the grounds of the Royal Hospital. Some consider it to be the premier garden event of the year. I was fortunate enough to attend it with my husband, Curtis on May 23<sup>rd</sup> and luckier yet, it was a gorgeous sun filled day. After a short walk from the hotel, we hopped on the public underground transport nicknamed the 'Tube' and arrived at

the gate eager for the day to begin. Even though it was a Member's Only day, the crowds were enormous. This year marked the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event.

The show featured gardens with the latest design trends, floristry showcasing the sights and scents of spring, scientific innovations and recent discoveries in horticulture, music and entertainment, an array of food choices, garden related shopping and a special garden of Royal Reflection & Celebration marking the passing of the Queen and the recent coronation of the King. The garden themes were creative, inspiring and even a bit unexpected. Here are a few of my highlights!

## **INSECTS & SUPPORT FOR POLLINATORS**

One exhibit featured an outdoor laboratory, built into a hillside offering an 'insect's eye view' and a space in which to study. The lab's roof structure was inspired by a compound insect eye and the lab is used for real scientific research, monitoring and studying insects visiting the garden.







Another garden highlighted the use of diverse topography. Earth floors and pathways, dead wood, piles of debris, bare sand and ancient walls provided numerous and varied habitats for insects. Water in still pools and flowing streams provided additional important insect habitats and added interest to the aesthetic and soundscape of the garden.







## RELOCATION

Every garden at RHS Chelsea has a relocation plan as part of the entry criteria. As an example, co-designer Charlotte Harris for Horatio was awarded ‘Best in Show’ winner for a specifically designed wheelchair-accessible garden, demonstrating that having a functional and practical space doesn’t mean having to compromise on aesthetics. She explained how the relocation plan impacted the design. “This is a garden meant for Sheffield and designed for Sheffield but popping in on the way to say hello to Chelsea, rather than debuting at Chelsea and finding a home afterwards,” she said.





## WEEDS & RUBBLE

Organizers for the show ensured that this year ‘weeds’ would be not only seen, but even celebrated, and they were to be found in many of the display gardens. Designer, Cleve West even used weeds from his own allotment in the garden of dandelions, herb robert and cleavers. Cleve said, “This is an experiment to see whether a mix of ornamentals and so-called ‘weeds’ can co-habit in an aesthetically pleasing way.” Throughout the grounds, a concerted effort was made to show the reuse of materials and resilient planting. Many plants were found peeking out from piles of rubble or reclaimed waste material. One designer, Tom Massey described the use of rubble as an alternative mulch to provide different types of crevices and cracks for plants and wildlife to make their home.





## **DISCOVERY & EDUCATION**

Chelsea provided a space to not only inspire but to inform. Educational exhibits promoted the latest discoveries in horticultural science and featured inspiring displays, many of which championed the benefits of gardening and how it can combat climate change or improve mental wellbeing.

One comprehensive and impressive demonstration by Letham Plants, featured everything *Astrantia* which happens to be one of my favorite perennials. *Astrantias* have been valued for centuries for their long blooming season, their delicate presence, and intriguing flowers. *Astrantia* is commonly known as Masterwort. The display included different varieties of the potted perennial, full color pictures, the history, uses and botanical artwork, flower seed examples, recommended fertilizer, propagation methods, and the plant at different stages of growth.



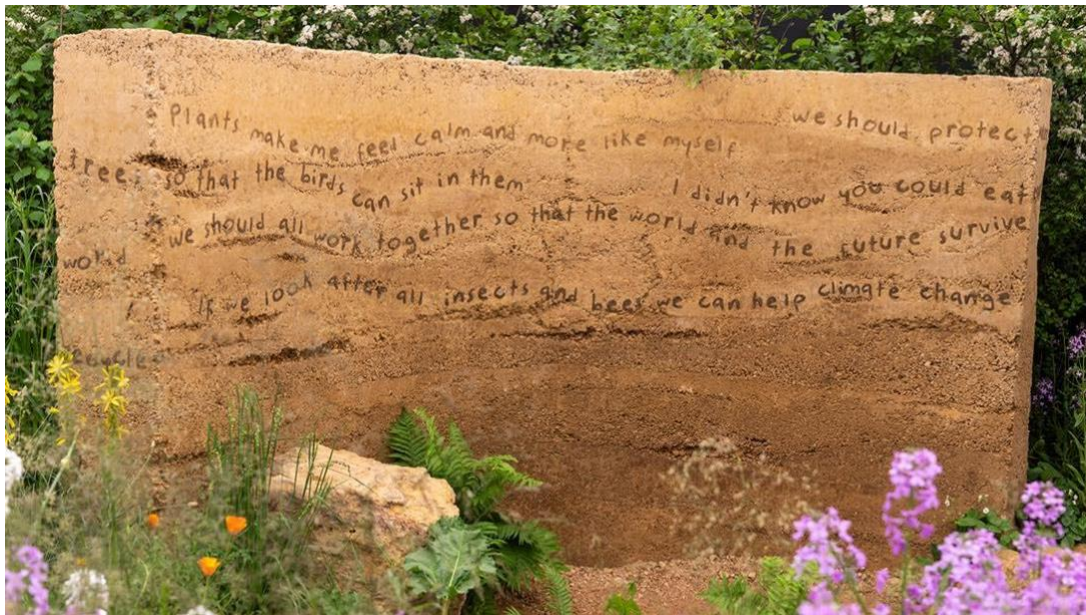


## INSPIRATION

The 'School Food Matters' Garden which won the 'People's Choice' award delivered the message that nutritious food, a healthy planet and access to nature are fundamental rights that every child should enjoy. It offered calming textural planting, bold colorful ribbons of color, and tranquil places where children could express their views on food and climate change through direct quotes painted on the central wall.







Within the Discovery Zone area, I met an exhibitor Zena Holloway who is a talented photographer, maker and material innovator. Inspired by coral and marine life, she creates soft textured lamps, wall hangings and fashion from grass seed and uses natural plant dyes to create unique colors for her art. She was such a passionate artist. Her sculptures and clothing were stunning and innovative.





There were complex massive floral installations that covered nearly 3 acres. RHS Florist of the Year entrants were given the task of converting a recycled steel drum or a 3m lamp post into a floral vision. In addition, with a ban on floral foam across the show, designers adopted innovative sustainable practices to create their incredible work.





And as with many garden shows there were grand awards. I was moved by the dreamy apricot color of the new David Austin rose for 2023 called 'Dannahue'. The plant that was selected the coveted Plant of the Year award was the deepest purple Apaganthus 'Black Jack'.



Diversity and inclusion appeared everywhere as a golden thread that ran through every aspect of the show. Wandering through the event amidst all the beauty there was a deeper assertion. Gardens should be for everyone, for those of different cultures, ages, and for the disadvantaged or challenged.

The Royal Horticulture Society, who brings us this annual event, formed in 1804 and has grown into the UK's leading gardening charity, working to encourage and improve the science, art and practice of horticulture. Their vision is to create a world where gardening is embraced as a way of life - a source of joy and fulfillment, building healthier lives, stronger communities, and thriving environments. I was honored to support their cause by attending this very special experience.