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## IT'S SHOWTIME

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# BEHIND THE SCHEMES

Peter Clay of Crocus reveals the secrets of successful show garden planting

Photo: John Campbell

There are two abiding principles that should guide anyone attempting a show garden: time is never on your side; and think backwards. Time is probably most important. Start as early as you can. We like to start preparing a year, or even two years, ahead.

Someone once said 'When you are designing a garden at Chelsea, first find your tree' and it's not a bad directive. Trees are not only incredibly important to the structure and balance of the garden but they inform the aesthetic. Their choice can signify the genius of the designer. If I was to say 'cloud-pruned hornbeam' or 'Viburnum rhytidophyllum', you will probably be able to picture the show gardens and name the designer (Tom Stuart-Smith, 2006 and 2008).

Starting a year or more in advance with the plants is also important. It's not just because they need to be big - as much as 5 litres for many perennials - but because it can give you more scope, particularly if you want to use something rare or unusual. James Basson's M&G show garden this year is themed around a quarry in Malta. To recreate the flora as authentically as possible, we've had to grow many plants from seed. Many Maltese wild plants are critically endangered and cannot be exported, so the only way to get them is to harvest seed and hope for the best. Two years ago, we started to harvest the seed, and now we are busy growing on those that germinated. Some will make it - a lot won't.

### Uncertainty the only certainty

The other thing about show gardens is that you have to embrace uncertainty: make it part of the plan. Some plants will not flower in time; some plants won't work as well as the designer had thought, or even at all. Some plants will die and whole batches may be wiped out. And the designer will always want a plant that never appeared on their original list.

Bear the vagaries of season and climate in mind. Choose some plants that you think probably won't flower in time, and some you think might flower a bit early. Give yourself options: have key plants that you really want to use, but have some fallbacks as well.

Remember that planting a show garden is not like a normal planting. Potted plants on planting pots to pot. Assuming your basic mix or pot size is predominantly 3 litre with sprinklings of 9cm and 5 litre. Your planting density is 30 per m<sup>2</sup>; versus



Photo: GAP Photos/Arnie Greenway/PA

"BEAR THE VAGARIES OF SEASON AND CLIMATE IN MIND. CHOOSE SOME PLANTS THAT YOU THINK PROBABLY WON'T FLOWER IN TIME, AND SOME YOU THINK MIGHT FLOWER A BIT EARLY"

3 per m<sup>2</sup> in a garden. We tend to grow about 7-8,000 plants for a show garden, in a mix of sizes. Bigger is usually better, so we grow a lot of 5 litres, but don't underestimate the importance of 9cm to give you your magical interludes and solutions for tight corners and edges.

Make sure you have a plan. Ideally, C and D. If there is a key plant, I always split production and get another good grower to do a batch. Sometimes a UK grower, but increasingly I go south. Last year, for Andy Sturgeon's *Telegraph* garden, I foolishly suggested we abandon most of his initial plant list and *voyage* into the unknown. I was a great fan of Olivier Filippi and his catalogue of unusual Mediterranean varieties, so in September 2015 we went to Montpellier and threw caution to the wind.

Olivier only sells his plants as 9cm plugs, which is fine - unless you want a 5-litre flowering plant by May. The only way this was going to happen was if I could change the climate and cheat winter in the UK. I persuaded one of four shrub growers in Spain that all his life he had wanted to grow perennials for Chelsea and the mad experiment began.

Of course we had disasters - the *Euphorbia deltoidea* that Andy had wanted to use got *Phytophthora*. All 200 of them. One of four *Asphodels* flowered too early, as did three other perennial varieties. And then huge swathes of other perennials got wiped out by misguided overwatering. Luckily I had a slender Plan B for

the *E. deltoidea* - Dave Root had a dozen or so clown in sunny Somerset, so I thought I might just get away with it. But then I got the call I dread. Dave rang in early April to say that a late frost had clobbered all his *Euphorbia*. Where was my Plan C? Happily we didn't need it this time, and at least we knew early.

Managing your expectations and evolving your ideas are really important as a designer. To that end I encourage designers to come to the nursery as much as possible to see how their plants are doing. Many find this terrifying as it always seems like nothing is going to flower in time and almost always they succumb to plant envy, and think that the plants we are growing for another garden are better than theirs.

It's paramount that we eliminate as many decisions at the showground as possible, because decision making takes time and slows momentum. Our mantra is that all decisions are taken before the show, none at the ground. To this end we lay out the garden precisely beforehand so that it is possible to walk the garden and feel the spaces, and we lay out all the big trees and shrubs as per plan. This means that you have plenty of time to choose the best site and position for all the big pieces so there are no discussions required at the showground. Damage to vulnerable rootballs caused by repositioning in situ can be avoided. It also gives designers the confidence that their design is going to work.



**PREVIOUS PAGE**

Andy Sturgeon's Telegraph Garden 2016, which won Best in Show

**OPPOSITE** Tom Stuart-Smith's 2006 Chelsea garden with *Viburnum* trees

**ABOVE** The quarry that inspired James Basson's Maltese garden for this year's Chelsea

**BELOW** Tom Stuart-Smith's 2008 Chelsea garden with cloud-pruned hornbeams

Photo: Crocus



Photo: Crocus

Invariably you realise that less is more. The difference between the best designers and the less experienced is their use of empty space: too many gardens at Chelsea are overstuffed, and it can be better to take one or even more of the big pieces out.

The most extreme example of this process is the mock up we did for Dan Pearson MSGD's Chatsworth garden in 2015 (see videos at [www.crocus.co.uk/chelsea2015/clan-pearson](http://www.crocus.co.uk/chelsea2015/clan-pearson)). Not only did we mark out the garden to scale, but we created the levels, positioned 200 tons of stone, laid out the stream, created the actual lining, turned on the water and craned five-ton trees into position. Had we not done this, we wouldn't have been able to build the garden in time, and Dan would not have been able to focus on the sublime planting that ensued.

### Enter the team

For success, your planting team should be planting early and finishing early. If you don't do that, the plants won't look their best, and the planting may have been compromised. You can have the best plants in the world, but if they are over planted or haven't had a chance to relax and assume a natural, dreamy state, you are likely to lose points.

The construction team have to buy into this idea, but it can be difficult to have this shared purpose when you have different companies doing construction and plant supply. It is understandable that each will view their tasks as separate, and if the construction is taking a bit longer than planned, the planting is held up. At Crocus, we do both, and this gives us an advantage.

For Chelsea, we always aim to start planting on the last Monday of build-up, a week before Press Day, and finish on the Friday. This means that when the assessors start coming round on the Sunday, they are looking at a finished garden, with the parts knit into a living whole.

Our planting teams are usually made up of two planners and one helper. The planters have to be exceptional plantmen or women and prepared to work incredibly hard. At Chelsea, momentum is nearly as important as painterliness. Agonising endlessly over a small corner of the garden eats up precious time and spreads a sense of impending doom throughout the team.

About a month before we start planting, I send the team a bit of background on the design,



Dan Pearson MSGD's Laurent-Perrier Chatsworth Garden, Best in Show at Chelsea 2015

oto:

together with visualisations of the garden, reference shots that I have found - and, of course, the plant list. This gives them the chance to research plants they haven't used before and begin to get their head around the palette. Last year was a stretch with Andy's garden, both because of the plant list and because we wanted to create a very different look. This year, with so many rare indigenous 'weeds' for James' Malta garden and more than 175 different varieties of plant, it is even more of a stretch.

Dress rehearsals are incredibly valuable, so we also have one or more planting days at the nursery. This is to enable the designer and planting team to share a united vision for the garden and experiment with actual combinations without any pressure. Of course, it's never perfect, and things change once the planting unfolds, but it gives the team confidence and momentum.

Discipline is also crucial. On the rehearsal day, we make sure that the planting team and designer know how we will manage the daily supply of plants. This is a boring but important detail and is about ensuring that the plants are in the best possible condition. All too often you see

plants being delivered to the showground too early and sometimes waiting for six or seven days before they are removed from the trolleys and planted. In this time, they may be stressed from lack of water, have grown too tall for the space and become misshapen, or even been shredded by a hailstorm or torrential rain.

Too many trolleys also means that the planting team get confused, panic and order more. We only deliver twice per day, and one member of the planting team is designated to issue the instruction. This has to be made by 3.30pm on the previous day for an 8.45am delivery and by 11am for a 4pm delivery. We keep a spreadsheet at base camp which is updated daily so that every night the planting team can see what sizes of each plant they have growing on at the nursery. This avoids them getting to Friday and screaming for more 5-litre *Euphorbia ceratocarpa* when they used them all on Tuesday.

'Thinking backwards' and planning every possible detail so that you never take major decisions at the showground is absolutely crucial. That could be the difference between Silver Gilt and Gold. But they won't win you 'Best in Show' - only a really good design will do that. So strive, above all, for an original idea. They are always in short supply. ○