

PHOTOGRAPHIC MEMORIES

REFLECTIONS IN MY LENS

Regular columnist and professional photographer Nicola Stocken looks back on the flower shows she has covered

Few days in the gardening calendar start earlier, or with a greater sense of anticipation, than press day of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Dawn breaks over a hushed showground, a rare lull before an invasion of the world's media, celebrities and gardening greats. After weeks of intense activity, the show gardens are mostly deserted, and perfect to photograph, apart from an occasional bleary-eyed designer doing some last-minute tittivating before the judges arrive.

Designers are a hardy breed, combining the staying power of marathon runners with a Blitz spirit that survives even the extremes of the British weather. When a heatwave threatened her flag irises, Bunny Guinness bound each bud in tissue and string,

while late cold snaps bring out the hairdryers to coax open tightly-shut buds. But the tornado-strength winds of 2006 were not so easily shrugged off, as trees were knocked sideways, flowers bruised and one of the judges had his hat blown away.

Even when the headlines are hijacked by unexpected dramas, the plants are the stars of any RHS show. Walking into the Great Pavilion always stops me in my tracks, not only dazzled by the beauty and sheer variety of plants, but also recalling memories triggered by that unmistakable smell of damp grass mingling with floral fragrances.

Shock of the new

There have been countless 'novel' plants, some one-hit wonders, others enduring. After alliums, foxgloves came in from the cold, nothing fancy at first, just popular selections in white or purple, reminiscent of Beatrix Potter's illustrations. In other years, RHS Flower Show Tatton Park was infiltrated by Australian tree ferns, while *Ligularia* 'The Rocket' landed in force at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show.

Plant fashions walk arm-in-arm with planting styles. Around the millennium, wildflower meadows appeared. It was sensational, and each year since seems to bring more cow parsley-like perennials and annuals. Naturalistic planting never looked back after Piet Oudolf and Arne Maynard's show garden in 2000.



RHS / NEIL HEWORTH

Conservation-related issues were highlighted when Jinny Blom, in collaboration with HRH The Prince of Wales, planted a flowering hawthorn hedge. 'It had never been done before at Chelsea – it was a scary process,' she says. Royal links remain strong. Last year, Prince Harry dropped into a show garden designed for Sentebale, the charity he co-founded.

Mainstream ideas

It has been fascinating to see the new ideas that develop gradually into established trends. In the late 1990s, designer Cleve West, in collaboration with sculptor Johnny Woodford, designed a garden at Hampton Court Palace dedicated to water conservation using drought-tolerant plants.

At the time it seemed ground-breaking, but has now become commonplace. Wildlife is another issue; one year, a blackbird had to be dissuaded from nesting, so realistic was the design. And then there's the whole Grow Your own movement – a 21st-century take on the 1940s 'Dig for Victory' campaign.

At its heart, horticulture remains a tight-knit, down-to-earth community. It is lovely to witness the genuine warmth between the most familiar faces.

There's rosarian David Austin, 90 this year and winner of 21 Chelsea Gold medals. He named his 1983 introduction, an unusual yellow rose, after his friend and great horticulturist Graham Stuart

Thomas. Another year, the talk was all about a bubbly Devon nurserywoman called Carol Klein.

I marvel at how Carol and her fellow TV presenters look so elegant, whatever the

weather. I have been sunburned at Chelsea, drenched in a cloudburst at Hampton Court Palace and resorted to winter thermals at Tatton Park.

It hasn't affected the carnival atmosphere, though, nor the standards of chivalry – there's always some gallant soul offering to help carry my camera equipment. ●



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Before judging: early morning at Chelsea.

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