

# WHAT GOES WITH WHAT

Combining plants in a border is a real skill. The best place to find inspiration is in the show gardens at Chelsea. We asked six top designers exhibiting this year to reveal their fresh, new planting styles

The show gardens at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show are sometimes dismissed as mere pastiches, but look more carefully and you'll find inspiration all around you. Successful garden designers have a knack of creating captivating plant combinations, ones that you can copy in your own garden. Motifs such as the peony 'Buckeye Belle', used so effectively with bronze fennel, blue irises and salvia by the Italian designer Luciano Giubbilei in the 2009 Laurent Perrier Garden, have been repeated again and again. And there are always new plants at Chelsea, as well as old favourites.

Words Val Bourne



Jekka McVicar

**'I always use splashes of purple foliage to make the greens shine a bit brighter'**

**Medal tally**

It's her first show garden, but her nursery Jekka's Herb Farm has already picked up 14 gold medals exhibiting in the Marquee at Chelsea.

**Signature planting style**

'It's always 100% herbs (3) and I always use splashes of red and purple foliage to make the greens shine a bit brighter.'

**A favourite combination**

'An irresistible, sexy mixture containing jagged silver cardoon foliage (*Cynara cardunculus*), mingling with feathery bronze fennel (1) (*Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum') and underplanted with purple sage (2) (*Salvia officinalis*

'Purpurascens'). Fennel flowers and pollen taste of aniseed, so cooks and chefs adore them.'

**Jekka's top tip**

'Always add a touch of red to your planting schemes, rather as Turner did to his moody seascapes, because it gives the other colours perspective. I often use the bright-red nasturtium 'Empress of India', which has edible leaves and flowers.'



**This year's Chelsea Show Garden: A Modern Apothecary sponsored by St John's Hospice**

'Instead of a traditional lawn I'm making an edible herb ley in a semi-shaded part of the garden under hawthorn trees. I'm using chicory (*Cichorium intybus*), salad burnet (*Sanguisorba minor*) and yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) to create a textured planting that can be picked and eaten. You could do this in a container, or in a small herb garden.'



Cleve West

**'Don't be frightened to use more of the same thing to create a texture or foil'**



**Medal tally**

Five golds – including one in 2006 for The Saga Insurance Garden, replanted at our HQ and looking better than ever. Plus two Best in Shows and a People's Choice.

**Signature planting style**

Great attention is given to creating atmosphere with drifts of plants chosen for texture, shape and form, rather than flower alone. There are always umbellifers and self-seeders, some of them unusual, to soften the planting.

**A favourite combination**

'I like any combination that suggests a wild habitat and I deliberately group together plants that enjoy the same conditions. Last year I used drought-tolerant plants in gravel and worked with a pink poppy (4) (*Papaver dubium* subsp. *lecoqii*



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var. 'Albiflorum') that I'd seen at Great Dixter. Pinks can be difficult, but it worked well with a tomato-red California poppy (1) (*Eschscholzia* 'Red Chief'). There were tiny pinpoints of fiery colour among the delicate pink poppies.'

**Cleve's top tip**

'Don't be frightened to use more of the same thing to create a texture or a foil. *Eryngium giganteum* 'Silver Ghost' (2) looks far bolder and more architectural when framed by a swirl of *Calamintha nepeta* subsp. *nepeta* 'Blue Cloud' (3), for instance, than on its own.'



**This year's Chelsea Show Garden: The M&G Garden**

'I shall be using a strong acanthus, probably the white-flowered 'Rue Ledan', with a toning green and white grass, *Melica altissima* 'Alba', as a foil. I'll almost certainly add *Epimedium* 'Amanagowa', a dark-leaved epimedium with dainty blush-white flowers smudged in squid ink. Pallid yellow aquilegias (*A. chrysantha* 'Yellow Queen') and a sylph-like foxglove called *Digitalis lutea* will add touches of light and shade.'





Matthew Wilson

**‘Grasses with fine foliage add a long-term, airy presence and unite any planting scheme’**

**Medal tally**

One silver-gilt for his first show garden – for the Royal Bank of Canada last year (2).

**Signature planting style**

Handsome and rugged with a backbone of foliage and fine trees.

**A favourite plant combination**

‘I like touches of pure drama and last year I used a group of soaring white foxtail lilies (1) (*Eremurus himalaicus*), above an early summer tapestry of deep-blue *Salvia x sylvestris* ‘Mainacht’ to contrast with the acid-yellow *Euphorbia* ‘Redwing’ (3). A fine-tined grass (*Festuca amethystine*) picked up the colour of the euphorbia foliage and added lots of airy movement.’

**Matthew’s top tip**

‘Grasses with fine foliage add a long-term, airy presence and unite any scheme.’



**This year’s Chelsea Show Garden:**  
*God’s Own County, sponsored by Welcome to Yorkshire*

Matthew, almost an honorary Yorkshireman, having been the Curator of Harlow Carr Garden near Harrogate for five years, is using York Minster as his inspiration. Local stone pillars and gargoyles are on loan from historic sites, while some of the more vivid planting will mimic the colours in the Minster’s Great East Window, the largest single expanse of medieval stained glass in the world.

‘My shadier area will feature foliage, which can get overlooked in the flowery glitz of Chelsea. The statuesque *Hosta* ‘Halcyon’, which has quilted slug-proof blue-grey foliage, will rise above the young russet fronds of *Dryopteris erythrosora*, along with an airy golden grass (*Deschampsia cespitosa*), which will add a touch of the Yorkshire moorland and catch the raindrops and sunbeams.’

GAP

Rosy Hardy

**‘Never be afraid of orange. It’s a touchpaper for blue and purple, as is yellow’**



**Medal tally**

It’s Rosy’s first show garden, but Hardy’s Cottage Garden Plants, the nursery she runs with her husband, has already won 20 gold medals exhibiting in the Marquee.

**Signature planting style**

Colour-coordinated cottage-garden style with a natural feel and artistic flair.

**A favourite combination**

‘I’m an admirer of bright yellow and orange because they draw the eye and stop that flat-faced look. I love *Trollius* ‘Dancing Flame’ (2), an orange

globe flower with a punk haircut. Used with deep-blue *Iris sibirica* (1), the orange trollius picks up the orange on the beards of the iris so the two hold hands together. The lime-yellow foliage of *Hosta* ‘Sum and Substance’ (3) provides a bright backdrop for this early summer explosion for moister soil (2).’

**Rosy’s top tip**

‘Always look at the detail in each flower, whether it’s the stamens or the veining, and use that as a springboard. Never be afraid of orange. It’s a touchpaper for blue and purple, as is yellow.’



**This year’s Chelsea Show Garden:**  
*Forever Freefolk sponsored by Brewin Dolphin*

‘I hate bitty planting that doesn’t work in the garden. I’m using a drift of soft and dainty flowers in pinks and purples through gravel in the sunny section to create a minimalist planting scheme. *Centaurea bella*, *Centaurea montana* ‘Joyce’ and *Scabiosa* ‘Kudo’ will emerge through the felted grey foliage and stems of an alpine willow (*Salix lanata*). Less can be more.’

Andy Sturgeon

**'Always look at the foliage first'**



**Medal tally**

Six golds and one Best in Show – in 2010 for his Mediterranean-inspired gravel garden for *The Telegraph*.

**Signature planting style**

An exuberant style, which is 'maximalist' rather than 'minimalist', with a restricted floral colour palette



and an emphasis on lots of foliage rather than flower.

**A favourite combination**

'This rich combination, which peaks in May and early June, features the deep-blue spires of *Salvia* 'Caradonna' (3), a warm-red aquilegia called 'Ruby Port' (1) and the silvery sword-like leaves of *Astelia chathamica* (2). The handsome foliage and lime-green flower heads of *Euphorbia x martini* (4) and the lacy green fronds of *Polystichum setiferum* (5), together with the linear astelia foliage, look good throughout the season whether there are flowers or not.'

**Andy's top tip**

'Always look at the foliage first. Mix the textures and the shapes and remember that all shades of green do go together, but you may have to segregate the extremes. The dark, high-gloss foliage of evergreen *Pittosporum tobira* will go with the olive-green *Myrica gale*, a Mediterranean shrub, for instance, if they have a buffer in between them.'



**This year's Chelsea Show Garden:**  
*The Telegraph Garden*

'There will be smatterings of colour, principally yellows, purples, blues whites, among lots of foliage, including the blue-green foliage of the flax lily *Dianella revoluta* 'Little Rev' and a soft green sedge named *Juncus effusus*. The heart of the garden is very manicured but the outer edges will contain wilder Mediterranean planting, including shrubby pistachio trees and *Myrtus communis* subsp. *tarentina*, a dwarf evergreen with scented white flowers.'



Jo Thompson

**'Take a main plant and look carefully at the texture and colour, and use that as your key'**

**Medal tally**

Two golds, including her 2010 design for a small garden for the charity Thrive, which helps people change their lives through gardening – it also won Best Urban Garden.

**Signature planting style**

Relaxed, loose planting with a traditional English feel and although Jo's style tends to be floaty and feminine, it's equally popular with men and women.



**A favourite combination**

Roger Platts, who has won many medals at Chelsea, has been my inspiration because I admire his simple planting style. I have an east-facing wall covered in the pale-pink rose 'Blush Noisette' (2), which flowers for ever and ever. It's supported by the late, purple *Clematis* 'Etoile Violette' (1) on one side and the spring-flowering, softer blue *Clematis* 'Frances Rivis' on the other. *Gaura lindheimeri* (3), a willowy perennial with white flowers touched in rhubarb-pink, blooms

through summer and into winter, picking up the colour of the rose.'

**Jo's top tip**

'Soil conditions come first because your chosen plants must thrive in their position. Then take a main plant and look carefully at the texture and colour, and use that as your key. The ragged amber and honey bark of *Betula nigra*, for example, is made to go with apricots such as *Verbasum* 'Cotswold Beauty'. The purple, fuzzy stamens of the verbascum then call for an added touch of purple.'

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**This year's Chelsea Show Garden:**  
*The Chelsea Barracks Garden sponsored by Qatari Diar*

'We're able to borrow the landscape of the Royal Chelsea Hospital and the stained-glass windows of the chapel are decorated with roses, so we're using fragrant, purple-pink old-fashioned roses such as 'Chianti', 'Charles de Mills' and 'Rose de Rescht'. We're framing these with a soft mixture that will include the silver-blue *Geranium* 'Mrs Kendall Clark', but we're also adding richer colour – including chocolate-coloured irises.'