

FINANCIAL TIMES

May 15, 2015 2:57 pm

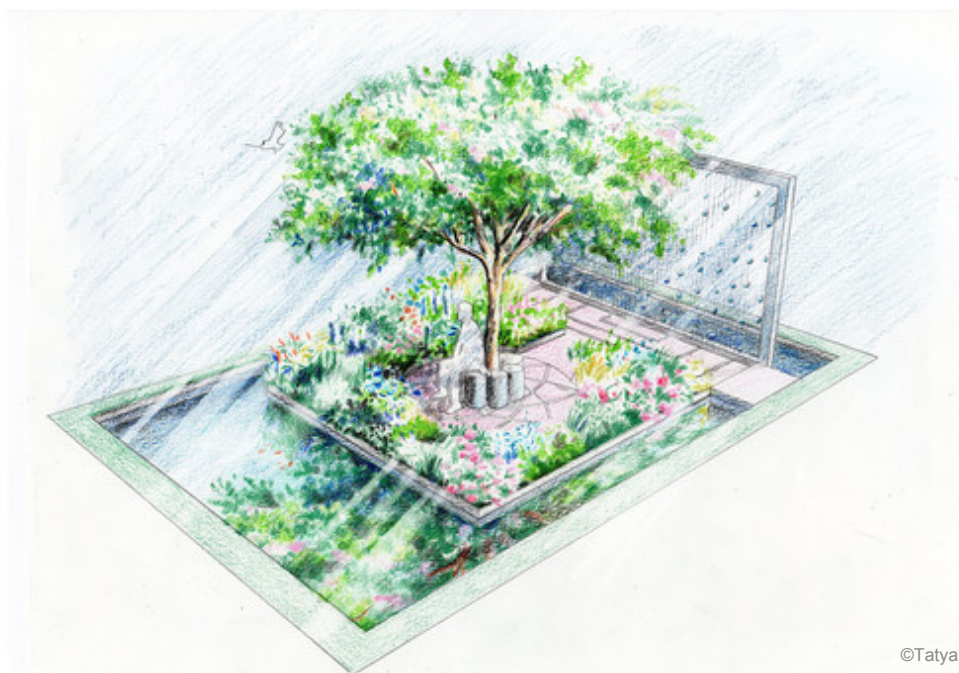
What are the hot tickets at this year's Chelsea Flower Show?



Robin Lane Fox

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Gardens and plants to look out for, from pineapple guava hedges to a 'kaleidoscope' of dahlias



©Tatyana Shynkarenko

'Thinking of Peace' garden by Tatyana Shynkarenko

On Monday evening, visitors to this year's Chelsea Flower Show gala will be eyeing the flowers and each other for a cool £392 per ticket. Has anyone actually done a deal in the Floral Pavilion? It is often claimed that the gala evening is the hottest venue for deals, but is this right? By "deal" I mean a financial deal, not a date. Last year I received a heartfelt Christmas card from two financially well-placed men wishing me a happy new year and assuring me they were going to have a very happy one as they had first met on Chelsea's Monday evening and fallen for each other beside the garden of the show's sponsors, M&G Investments. They disagreed with my cool review of it and were writing to say that it was "unforgettably hot".

I am sure it was, but I am not changing my criteria to include potential

love interest. I am as keen as ever to see this year's displays of roses, but the English Rose is the brand name of David Austin's hybrid roses, not of non-married female visitors to a gala stand. If rose-scented visitors do happen to want to find me, I will be scrutinising the National Collection of Dahlias' exhibit with great interest. It is promising a "kaleidoscopic" show of dahlias. By late August I wonder nowadays why I grow anything else.

The exhibit honours something which may have escaped you — "The Year of Mexico in the UK and the UK in Mexico". Quite by coincidence, a big Mexican-style garden show opens this weekend at the New York Botanical Garden. It will run until November 1 and is an unmissable tribute to the role of flowers and plants in the art of Frida Kahlo. It is showing some of her paintings as well as a richly planted garden in the NYBG conservatory, inspired by the garden at her Blue House near Mexico City. Dahlias are not at the forefront, but there will be Mexican "shopping and dining experiences".

After avoiding the Chelsea caterers' version of a Mexican wrap, I will be looking at the outdoor gardens instead. This year even more exhibits than usual have international themes. There is a Peace in Ukraine garden and a Hope in Vulnerability garden for a children's centre in Lesotho, whose charity was partly founded by Prince Harry. A Viking Ocean Cruises garden will display a steel sculpture of Njord, Norse god of the sea, and "multiple polished surfaces to reflect the sea". It sounds dire. A Beauty of Islam garden will be using hard landscape patterns that "reflect those found within Islam". The designers of The Hidden Beauty of Kranji are trying to evoke the Kranji suburb of Singapore by planting coconut palms, rubber plants and much else that might be expected to die on an old-fashioned frosty mid-May night. Ambitiously, a Cloudy Bay garden is aiming to "visualise the flavours experienced when drinking one of Cloudy Bay's wines". The garden claims to reflect "tasting notes".



Dahlia Cornel

After more than 10 years' absence, the respected designer Dan Pearson is back with a garden that everyone will want to examine. Two years ago I enjoyed a careful look at the large rock garden at Chatsworth in Derbyshire, a legacy of the Victorian garden expert Joseph Paxton. What ever should be done with these grand dinosaurs that are difficult for modern budgets to maintain? Among the rocks, Chatsworth had opted for quite a few cotoneasters. Now, with Laurent-Perrier champagnes, Chatsworth and Pearson are showing a garden based on Paxton's wild and wondrous rock landscape. The brief claims its "planting reflects the lightness, freshness and delicacy of the 200-year-old family-owned champagne house".



Dahlia Fascination

FT contributor Matthew Wilson is also playing to his strengths. At Hyde Hall in Essex, he laid out the Dry Garden for the RHS. Now, for the Royal Bank of Canada, he is laying out a three-part garden which shows how to save water while including flowers and good vegetables. The dry stone walls are recycled "mill backings" worked by a stonemason from Huddersfield and the dry riverbed is made of a "hornstone" which is as tough as the horns on deer and chamois. The planting is "updated Mediterranean", like the planting in many FT readers' overseas bolt-holes. Rosemary is having a great

flowering year and here it will be matched with a “macro bonsai olive” and a pineapple guava hedge.

The Daily Telegraph garden looks promising from early photos and drawings. Admittedly, it says it is in dialogue with the De Stijl Movement of which few gardeners have heard. This movement has led it to plant “colour blocks of vibrant primary colours”, which strikes me as a good answer to a flat Chelsea site. I much welcome their annuals and bulbs, graded into separate strong colours. They are a merciful change from the drab planting in most of the show gardens last year.

The show's sponsor, M&G, is showing a big retreat garden, not as a market warning but as an attempt to evoke peace and elegance, despite a couple of stone sculptures and an odd two-storey wooden building at one end. Maybe some of you will find it “hot” again, but it is different to the two anniversary gardens in this rich anniversary year.

Surrey County Council is one of the sponsors for a Runnymede garden, topically commemorating the signing of Magna Carta in 1215. After the recent surge of Tory blue we can all be thankful that nobody has had to go into coalition with irascible King John and watch him chewing the parliamentary matting in rage.

Six-hundred years later, we reversed John's defeats at the hands of the French, thanks to Wellington's immortal victory at Waterloo. His commemorative school, Wellington College, has been more famous for rugger than gardening, but its Living Legacy Garden aims to present its links to “eight aptitudes” and the robust qualities of its main planting — an oak. I wait for reports of a gala date among its cubes of beech, the tree behind Wellington's army, and their pattern in honour of his battle plan.



Rosa The Poet's Wife, from David Austin Roses

Photographs: Tatyana Shynkarenko; Dave Zubraski/Gap Photos; Michael Howes/Gap Photos

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