



## Gardens stand tall at Chelsea Flower Show

World of trends on exhibit in a land where cabbages are kings

BY MARY JAMES • SPECIAL TO THE U-T

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In this Japanese-inspired display garden at the 2011 Chelsea Flower Show, a naturalistic planting of flowers and grasses contrasts with more formal structures and hardscape.

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Diarmuid Gavin's display at the 2011 Chelsea Flower Show included a patio-pod hoisted high by a giant crane. The garden earned a gold medal and a people's choice award.



The tallest-ever display garden at the Chelsea Flower Show featured a wall of herbs and window boxes overflowing with edibles.

**LONDON** — Gardens soared to new heights at the 2011 Chelsea Flower Show, Britain's annual gardening love-fest that draws royals and rock stars, plant nerds and putterers to a usually quiet corner of this bustling city every May.

One celebrity designer, Diarmuid Gavin, suspended an "Avatar"-inspired patio-pod 82 feet above a grassy marsh with the help of a giant crane. His "Irish Sky Garden" shared airspace with the show's tallest-ever garden, a vertical wall of herbs 30 feet high; a glass deck floating above a classy kitchen garden; and numerous roof gardens brimming with lavender, sedums and such.

Closer to earth, glitz gave way to reality and the serious themes, local and global, that now color landscapes everywhere. Worldwide weather havoc dealt England its hottest, driest spring on record. Every drop of water, every inch of soil, every pricey pound spent on gardens, should bear fruit — literally, according to Chelsea trendsters, while doing not a pence of harm to the environment.

Because this is England, where a show like Chelsea merits cheery editorials on the country's competitive gardening spirit, sustainability must have style, too. High style.

Which brings us back to that floating deck and plant-cloaked high rise. Below them were stunning edible landscapes where regal purple cabbages reigned, artsy insect hotels welcomed beneficial bugs, herb "rivers" coursed through gravel, lettuce ringed orange trees, and bees buzzed around borage as if they had discovered Eden.

Flowers shared space with rain barrels, solar panels, wind turbines, recycled plastics, locally sourced stone and hydroponics. Sophisticated plantings often exhibited a carefree naturalism as if risen from the land rather than imposed upon it.

Yes, though dampened by the economy for a few years, clearly Chelsea was soaring again, with purpose and vision. Here are details of some highlights:

**Potager perfection:** Award-winning designer Bunny Guinness packed enough edibles into her display garden to feed a family of four for a year, she said. Hard to argue when eyeing curved wicker and cedar raised beds that overflowed with charmed combos of squash blossoms and roses, poppies and parsley, chard and scabiosa, and those gorgeous cabbages. Potted and espaliered fruit trees added to the bounty. "A garden outside the kitchen has to look good," she said of mouthwatering display. Divided into four quadrants with a low central fountain, the disciplined design maintained order in the midst of such riotous abundance.

**Urban tilth:** "Did you know that without constant resupply, London would run out of food in four days?" asked Laurie Chetwood, who co-designed the six-story-tall herb wall and apartment building it fronted to showcase vertical gardening and encourage urban greening. Window-box gardens nurtured tomatoes, peppers and strawberries while farmed fish swam in a stream flowing through a Plexiglas outdoor dining table. Built by schoolchildren, a block of insect "hotels" attractive to birds and bats resembled a found-art piece. Sustainable technology from solar to

Seen at Chelsea

**Herbs,** from creeping thymes and lavenders, to blue-flowered borage and bronze fennel. Edible, drought-tolerant, wildlife friendly and good-looking.

**Spotlight on yellow flowers.** Favorites ranged from euphorbias, yarrow and Jerusalem sage to buttercups and other wildflowers, grasses and irises.

**Plant of the Year Anemone 'Wild Swan,'** a white-flowering hybrid Japanese anemone with subtle blue bands on the petals' backs. Bloom spans six months or more. Also notable — an orange 'Clementine Kiss' sweet pea, inky 'Black Velvet' petunia and citrus-scented 'Apricot Fragrant Falls' begonia.

**Celebrity-named roses** — the white 'William and Catherine' after the newly wed Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (David Austin Roses) and pale pink 'Natasha Richardson' after the late actress, daughter of Vanessa Redgrave (Harkness Roses).

**Words in the garden,** from a seat labeled BENCH in the "Magistrate's Garden" to the verse-filled "Literary Garden" with its charming fountain of stacked words: "We Never Know the Worth of Water Till the Well is Dry."

**Mary James**

If you go

**The 2012 Chelsea Flower Show** will be May 22-26. Details for it and other events during the

hydroponics fueled it all.

**Nature-like:** Several award-winning gardens emphasized naturalistic, impressionist plantings with nods to modern meadows and the 19th century “wild gardens” championed by William Robinson. In one elegant display, a Japanese-like garden with a house of bamboo panels that rotated in the wind, sculpted boulders and rivers of gravel and water were complemented by swaying knee-high grasses and dusky rose and bronze flowers.

**Waste not, want not:** Yes, a shipping container that has traveled the world can be a garden retreat. Sure an old safe can be a stash for garden tools. And scuffed gym flooring, a garden fence. Garden designers gave new life to a host of urban detritus that looked surprisingly at home in the midst of nodding wildflowers, pools of captured rainwater and green roofs. Even a sleek design from Monaco, the principality’s first at Chelsea, touted such sustainable materials as eucalyptus decking.

**Past perfect:** Terrorism, wars, climate change, recession — no wonder the urge to look back was irresistible. Several of the small artisan gardens evoked simpler times in the countryside. Rustic, somewhat overgrown plantings set the scene for playing, painting and “putting by.” One award-winning garden was built around a traditional Korean outhouse. In these celebrations of old-fashioned gardens and gardening, technology is the ultimate outsider — giant cranes included.

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