

Mud, B-list celebs and a rickety pyramid with a lift. Welcome to the flower show

Chelsea brings its customary horticultural feast for gardeners while still offering its token fantasy exhibit



Esther Addley

The internal lift at the Westland Magical Garden might have been clanking alarmingly as it carried visitors, a handful at a time, 24 metres above the grounds of the Royal hospital in Chelsea, but that was doing little to deter the queue.

"We're here, and if there's any chance of getting up this thing, it will have to be today," said Sarah Guinness, waiting determinedly in line with her daughter for the chance of a brief, dizzying view.

The garden, a seven-storey, creeper-clad pyramid of scaffolding poles seemingly held together by honeysuckle, is the token fantasy exhibit of the Chelsea flower show, and has a similar likelihood of being installed in your garden as the pink steel pod its designer, the TV gardener Diarmuid Gavin, suspended from a crane over last year's show.

That's not the point, of course. Chelsea may be the stately grandmother of the handful of horticultural shows that adorn the British summer, one of the first of the fixed points in the establishment's season, but she knows how to show a little leg when required. If that means a stainless steel tubular slide from the top of a rickety tower above Chelsea embankment (with stairs for the less adventurous), so be it.

Yesterday was press preview day, an opportunity for the individual sponsors, garden designers and growers to show off their wares before the doors open today to Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) members and, later in the week, members of the public. The judges had toured the site early in the day and retired to deliberate, and the site would be closed mid-afternoon to permit the Queen a private tour. That left a window of a few hours in which the show grounds were open to roaming packs of film crews, the guests of numerous sponsors' champagne receptions and a lively assortment of moderately familiar faces from celebrity's B-list.

Perhaps only at Chelsea, for instance, would the Who's Roger Daltrey find himself posing for pictures among "a warm planting palette of orange, yellow, burgundy and rusty brown" with the Gardeners' World presenter Joe Swift, corporate representatives from Homebase and a girl group formed by former patients of the Teenage Cancer Trust. "He's not exactly a gardener," admitted a representative from Homebase, the garden's sponsor. "He said, 'It will be nice when it was a bit frayed around the edges, like I am'."

At the L'Occitane Immortelle Garden, the quiet of the delicately recreated Corsican landscape was shattered by the scheduled arrival of the Britain's Got Talent judge Amanda Holden to pose among the yellow flowers, closely attended by a crowd of paparazzi. They would be disappointed shortly afterwards when a promised appearance



Chelsea pensioners line up on Diarmuid Gavin's seven-storey Westland Magical Garden (above). A vintage Mini covered in flowers (below left) and part of an arthritis research garden (below right). Photographs: Graeme Robertson for the Guardian

'We've had to put a lot of stuff into polytunnels to keep them dry. We've barely seen the sun'



Summer - at last

Temperatures to reach 25C

Frustration at the UK's dreary start to summer should ease this week with firm forecasts of warm and sunny weather from tomorrow onwards.

Temperatures are expected to reach 25C (77F) before the weekend - a level almost unimaginable during the recent dour spell. The cold will attempt a comeback next week but the force is with the warmer weather and the north of England is expected to enjoy a particularly sunny start to June. Forecaster Tom Tobler of MeteoGroup said: "It's certainly turning quite warm this week and things will really start to heat up from Wednesday onwards."

The Met Office is cautious about rumours that record warmth later in the summer will reward the country for the season's poor start, although plenty of sunshine is expected in June. Poor weather is not a UK monopoly at the moment, with heavy rain and strong winds disrupting the Cannes film festival over the weekend, **Martin Wainwright**

by Joan Collins to publicise the RHS campaign for school gardening failed to materialise, leaving the photographers to make do with Laurence Llewelyn Bowen clutching a small pot which he had decorated for the purpose.

Inside the Great Pavilion, exhibitors were making final preparations or clearing up abandoned champagne glasses from roped-off areas marked "guests only". Underfoot, the waterlogged lawn was already turning to mud.

Certainly the miserable spring had provided an additional challenge this year, said Julie Haythorn, designer of the stand for Todd's Botanic, an Essex nursery that specialises in drought-tolerant plants. "We've had to put a lot of stuff into the polytunnels just to keep them dry. We've barely seen the sun." Her alliums had proved particularly tricky in the wet, cold conditions, she said but on the other hand, the irises, usually finished by now, were perfect.

For Patricia Fox, designer of Rooftop Workplace of Tomorrow, one of the large show gardens, the weather had almost brought disaster when the nursery supplying her betulas had sent a photograph, two days before delivery was due, of a tree without a single leaf. She had hastily swapped species.

After 17 days of installation there had been a burst of elation, followed by "a bit of a slump", she said, as she sat down for dinner, and suddenly realised there was nothing more to do.

It was another reason to look forward to the real plant lovers coming. "What really made it special [three years ago] was people coming up and saying such wonderful, lovely, lovely things about the garden. I remember one older lady came over to me and took my hand and said, 'You're my inspiration.' That makes all of this worthwhile."

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