



'GARDENS HAVE NEVER BEEN SO CARED FOR'

They're our refuge, says Suffolk-based, award-winning garden designer Tom Hoblyn, who will be weaving a little magic with his Secret Garden at this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show

WORDS: Jayne Lindill



Tom Hoblyn Landscape & Garden Design - Hillersdon House (14 June 2020)

For the first time ever in its 108-year history, the Chelsea Flower Show is being held in September this year rather than customary May – and garden designers have been enthusiastically embracing the challenge of creating gardens in an entirely different season, none more so than Tom Hoblyn.

“I’m very much looking forward to it, particularly because it’s in September,” says the Suffolk-based designer with one gold, two silver and three silver-gilt Chelsea medals to his name. Tom is designing a garden for luxury jeweller Boodles, which is making its Chelsea debut with a theme of ‘Secret Garden’, and will release a specially designed pink and white diamonds bracelet to mark the occasion.

“When James Amos [Boodles director] and I began to discuss Chelsea, I suggested not waiting until May 2022 and going for this autumn as it presented an opportunity to grow a whole different palette of plants,” says Tom. “The Secret Garden is an amazing brief. Obviously I grew up with the book and various TV adaptations, and have even seen the latest film.

“I want to try and capture that magical feeling of being in a secret garden. So the garden has an outer part of mainly naturalistic and slightly wild planting of mainly greens and whites. In the inner ‘secret part’, plants are more exotic and magical with tree ferns, towering dahlias, abutilon and fuchsia. Separating the two is a sculpted louvred wall depicting the threshold of the secret garden.”

After the cancellation of last year’s live show, garden lovers are looking forward to 2021’s event more than ever. Tom is in no doubt that RHS Chelsea is the most important event of the year for professional garden designers, whether or not they’re exhibiting. “Not only is it a chance to catch up with people in the industry, it’s also a chance to see what’s new in the plant world. Professionally, it’s an opportunity to showcase your latest work – though you are putting your head above the parapet, which is always worrying.”

Despite his impressive Chelsea successes – as well as the medals

he won the RHS People’s Choice Award for The Arthritis Research UK Garden 2012 – Tom is never confident. Medals are important, he says, not only for him and his team but for everyone involved in creating an exhibit. “Even for a small garden, there is a huge team who give a tremendous amount of their time, and a medal makes it all worth it.

“I’ve learnt not to be confident as there are so many factors beyond your control. Who really knows what will reliably flower for the third week of September? If we’ve had a hot, dry summer, leaves will be entering autumnal phase, and could even be dropping (heaven forbid!).”

September’s Chelsea Flower Show will certainly look and feel different with new elements to reflect the changes the nation has gone through as a result of the Covid pandemic. There will be The Florence Nightingale Garden – a celebration of modern day nursing; Finding Our Way – an NHS tribute garden; The Bible Society: Psalm 23 Garden, by multi-award-winning designer Sarah Eberle; and The M&G Garden, by designers Harris Bugg, highlighting the need for beautiful and restorative green spaces within towns and cities, now more important than ever.

“The most famous garden quote of all: ‘we must cultivate our gardens’ could not be more true today,” says Tom. “Gardens have never been so cared for as people take refuge. More people are growing their own produce and gardeners are even more environmentally aware – all because of all the global nonsense going on around us.”

Gardens have been central to Tom’s life from an early age. “My grandfather had an amazing garden – he was a horticulturalist – in East Malling, Kent,” he recalls. “My cousin and I used to traipse around after him whilst he tended his beloved plants. Needless to say, both of us went into horticulture.

“My father assigned a small plot to each child. Whilst my brother and sister competed for tallest sunflower, I devoted mine to propagating whatever I could from seed. I still get the same feeling of joy today as I did then when something germinates.”

Tom’s farming background – his family owned a farm in Cornwall – helped set the direction for his life and career and he initially studied for a degree in agriculture. “I knew I was destined to work outside and the fact that we owned a farm, it seemed logical that I would take it over. Hence training in agriculture first time around. All that experience and training has helped enormously, especially in the understanding of climate, soil, pests and diseases.”

It was while farming that Tom





Photo: Tom Hoblyn



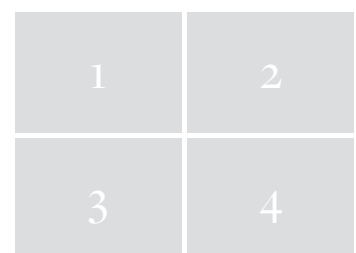
Photo: Tom Hoblyn

took a job as a gardener to help make ends meet. He was hooked and decided to train at the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, where his design tutors were the highly regarded Christopher Bradley-Hole and Brita von Schoenaich. “I discovered there was a career to be had in the making of gardens,” he says, “and I was very lucky to work for Christopher Bradley-Hole after graduation.”

Not surprisingly, his time at Kew has greatly influenced Tom’s development as a designer. It was while studying that he came

across William Robinson, the Irish gardener and journalist whose ideas about wild gardening helped popularise the English cottage garden in the early 20th century. “His writing very much influences my style in creating gardens,” says Tom. “*The Well-Tempered Garden* [by Christopher Lloyd] was my first gardening book and remains a firm favourite.

“I admire the likes of Cleve West and Andy Sturgeon – they are both extremely talented designers. As for true gardeners, ▶



- 1: Tom Hoblyn Landscape & Garden Design – Hillersdon House in Devon
- 2: Designers should respond to the client brief and location, says Tom Hoblyn
- 3: Tom Hoblyn Landscape & Garden Design – Hillersdon House in Devon.
- 4: A Hawkedon garden designed by Tom Hoblyn

Tom Coward, Matthew Rees and Alys Fowler are all amazing at what they do.”

Tom set up his company, Thomas Hoblyn Garden Design Ltd, in 2002 and has worked on a wide range of projects from London townhouses to large country houses and rural estates, healing gardens, the rewilding of coastal land and public parks. He's known for his naturalistic planting and ability to respond to the environment – his 2011 RHS Chelsea garden was relocated to the Eden Project in Cornwall.

Does he agree that individual garden designers have their own distinct style, just as interior designers do? “I think some do and then you have your trendsetters. I suppose the good ones evolve over time, a bit like an artist.

“But there's a lot to be said for designers who react to the client brief and location, providing a successful garden that doesn't look like a designed garden. I'd like to think that I fall somewhere between the two. Though I suppose my plant palette is quite

distinctive. “I like to get a brief, thoroughly analyse the location – soil test, climate, physical and financial constraints and so on – and then respond to these factors in my design. I love it when a client is really keen and wants to savour the whole process.”

That way, he says, every step gets properly tried and tested.

“The most important thing is that there needs to be a good chemistry between the client and myself. Secondly, it has to be an interesting project. I'm presently working on possibly our largest project to date, a beautiful country house in the Cotswolds. I have known the client for 10 years and had plenty of lead time to get to know the grounds. This is truly satisfying.”

His own garden is 2.5 acres of “partially tamed wilderness” in Bardwell. “We back on to wetland, so I have allowed some areas to re-wild, other parts are wetland meadow. As you get closer to the house, so the garden becomes more like a garden with flower beds, in particular

an iris peony walk. “Adjacent to the house is a wonderful crinkle crinkle walled kitchen garden, brim-full of fruit and veg. That's where you'll find me first thing in the morning.” ♦

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SEE TOM HOBLYN AT CHELSEA

RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW

SEPTEMBER 21-26

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Royal Hospital
Chelsea
London SW3 4SR*

The world's greatest flower show will be held for the first time ever in September with the usual cutting-edge garden

design, fabulous floral displays and great shopping. Local interest with Suffolk-based garden designer Tom Hoblyn, who has partnered with Boodles to create *The Boodles Secret Garden*, inspired by the well-loved children's story by Frances Hodgson Burnett. Plan your visit and buy tickets at rhs.org.uk

Tom Hoblyn's design for The Secret Garden, created for luxury jeweller Boodles



Picture: Tom Hoblyn