

This year's Chelsea Flower Show boasts a record number of Show Gardens, designed by some top-notch gardeners. Here's the pick of the bunch...

MEET CHELSEA'S STAR PLAYERS

On a bitterly cold January day, when spring still seemed a very long way away, the RHS unveiled the highlights of this year's Chelsea Flower Show to the gardening press. The presence of Mary Berry – who is an RHS ambassador – caused a flutter of excitement, but an even greater thrill was the intriguing list of gardens that was announced.

Chelsea 2016 is shaping up to be a blockbuster year, with a record number of Show Gardens: 17, up from 15 last year. And after all the criticism at the lack of women designers in 2015, six highly regarded female designers have Show Gardens this year.

So whether you've got a ticket to Chelsea, or will be watching the nation's premier gardening event from the comfort of your sofa, there's lots to look forward to. This year we'll again be able to enjoy wall-to-wall television coverage of the show on the BBC, presented by Weekend's own Monty Don, Sophie Raworth, Joe Swift, Nicki Chapman and James Wong. But who are the ones to watch?

THE FAMOUS FACES

Several of this year's designers are also familiar faces on TV. Chris Beardshaw, who's morphed effortlessly from heart-throb presenter on shows like *Real Rakeovers* and *Housecall* to internationally renowned designer, has made a garden for Great Ormond Street, which will be relocated to the children's hospital once the show is over.

Matthew Wilson, a regular on TV gardening programmes and Gardeners'



Above: Diarmuid Gavin and his design.
Left: Jo Thompson and her garden

Question Time, is creating a garden paying tribute to the beauty of York Minster and Yorkshire. Andy Sturgeon, a former Best In Show winner who has presented the TV coverage of Chelsea for several years, is making a very welcome return as a designer with a Show Garden

inspired by the geological events that have shaped our landscape.

THE LADIES

Jekka McVicar, Britain's Queen of Herbs, is moving out of the Great Pavilion that houses stands from nurseries and plant

societies and designing her first Show Garden, called *A Modern Apothecary*. It's filled with herbs including unusual varieties such as yarrow and salad burnet. Rosy Hardy, one of the most respected plantswomen in the country, is making her debut as a Chelsea Show Garden designer with *Forever Freefolk*, inspired by chalk streams such as the River Test, which runs past her garden in Hampshire.

Jo Thompson, one of only two women designers with Show Gardens last year, was thought very unlucky not to get a gold medal in 2015. She's back this year with an urban communal garden inspired by the nearby

Chelsea Barracks. The garden will be relocated after the show to the Royal British Legion Village in Aylesbury, Kent. And Catherine MacDonald, known for her contemporary style, is

doing her first Chelsea Show Garden, with a glasshouse and tropical plants.

AND LOOK OUT FOR...

One of the more intriguing gardens is by Nick Bailey, curator at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which celebrates the beauty to be found in the mathematics and algorithms of plant life. And Hugo Bugg, a young designer who won a gold medal with his debut in 2014, will want to prove he wasn't a flash in the pan with his garden on the theme of sacred water.

And the most anticipated garden? That's the work of TV presenter Diarmuid Gavin. His *Harrods Eccentric British Garden*, inspired by the mad designs of W Heath Robinson, promises 'excitement and movement' and is sure to be a talking point. It could be wonderful or it could be terrible – but, like the rest of the Chelsea Flower Show, you won't want to miss it. ■

Constance Craig Smith

The Chelsea Flower Show runs from 24-28 May; see rhs.org.uk for details. The TV coverage starts on Sunday 22 May and continues throughout the week on BBC1 and BBC2.

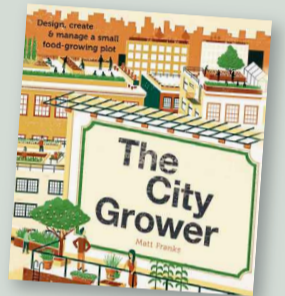
Things to do this week



Visit this...

Quarry Bank, Styal, Cheshire

This historic textile mill, which inspired Channel 4's *The Mill*, is hosting a *Clockwork Garden* exhibition until September with games, mechanical artwork and clues to solve. *Open daily, 10.30am-5pm (exhibition closes at 4.30pm); adult entry £15.75, NT members free. nationaltrust.org.uk.*



Read this...

The City Grower by Matt Franks

Franks shows time-poor urbanites how to grow edible crops in a very small space. There are tips on how to build your own containers from reclaimed materials and what to plant if your plot doesn't get a lot of sunlight. There's also a useful planting plan. *£16.99, Kyle Books.*



Buy this...

RHS Homeware range
The Royal Horticultural Society's Lindley Library is a treasure trove of beautifully illustrated historic books on botany. The new 'Allotment' range takes inspiration from the drawings and includes planters (£16.99 for two, above), notebooks (£8.99), and homeware such as china mugs (£20 for a set of two). *rhsshop.co.uk.*

CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW BY NUMBERS

1913 was the year the Royal Horticultural Society show was first held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Apart from during the two world wars, it's been held there every year since.

500 London buses would fit in the 2.9 acre Great Pavilion.

165,000 visitors come to the show every year – it would be more but the numbers are capped.

11,000 glasses of champagne were consumed in 2015.

3 of the firms that exhibited at the first show are still doing so: McBean's Orchids, Kelways Plants and Blackmore & Langdon's.



Workers at the 1931 show

DIG THIS Enjoy tea, homemade lunches, plant sales, an owl display and local art at Little Ouseburn Open Gardens, North