

GARDEN
View

"Take inspiration, but don't take it too seriously"

Chelsea is the go-to show for horticultural thrills, says Alex Mitchell. Sharpen your elbows, we're going in



● **Alex Mitchell** trained at Chelsea Physic Garden, writes for the Evening Standard and is author of four books including *Gardening on a Shoestring*



"To ask if the Chelsea Flower Show is for real people is to miss the point entirely"

Looking for planting inspiration for your Viking plunge pool or derelict Macedonian forge? Need help blending your canal boat into the back garden, or wondering how best to landscape your Patagonian footbridge? Then look no further... The RHS Chelsea Flower Show is back this month. Hoorah!

To ask if the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is for real people is to miss the point entirely. Do we ask for take-home tips from the Olympics? We come to be entertained, dazzled and amused. And to buy twine made from the wool of rare-breed mountain goats, obvs.

I love going to Chelsea to ooh at the show gardens, smell the ozone-y air inside the Grand Marquee and try out swingseats I will never buy. I also quite enjoy overhearing D-list celebrities shouting "I'll see you in the Green Room, darling" while knowing this luxury is likely to be a Portakabin within sight of a toilet.

However, there are a few things I have learnt over the years that make the experience of visiting the world's greatest flower show more pleasurable. First, avoid standing too close to anyone with a tote bag, especially in the tight jostle around the show garden ropes, since

their sharp corners can do a surprising injury. This isn't easy because an unscientific survey by me suggests that 90% of people going to Chelsea will carry one of these, to fit in all the tat; unique horticultural equipment they plan to buy at the show and take home on the train.

Beware of getting too carried away on the trade stands. That driftwood dolphin being chased by a cat might look charming when you've had two glasses of warm Prosecco, but will it really go with your Victorian rectory?

Yes, those wind chimes made from recycled cashew milk Tetrapaks are small enough to take home on the tube, but do you really need any more?

The exception is shepherds' huts. You might be more likely to win the lottery than ever be able to afford one, but it's entirely acceptable to pretend you are a serious buyer so you can have a nice sit down.

Chelsea is always crowded, and the throngs around the show gardens can start to feel a little

intimidating. Hold your own by muttering, "Of course, last year was all about lupins," or the old standby, "I preferred her earlier work". Randomly shouting loud horticultural latin enquiries to no-one in particular, such as "Is that *hirsuta* or *oblongata*?" can do this job too.

If you want to spot the show garden designers themselves, they can usually be identified by crumpled linen and the pale, slightly crazed expression of someone who has barely slept for 30 nights. If they have scored a Gold or Silver-Gilt medal they are much more likely to lurk around their show garden for the duration of the show, whereas Bronze medal winners can probably be found propping up the bar in the Rose & Crown round the corner.

Finally, and most importantly, carry a plastic bag to sit on when you are exhausted, starving and can't find a seat, so have to resort to the only clear patch of damp ground available, which is next to a dustbin behind the Pimm's tent. You never know, if you're lucky, you may spot a celebrity doing the same.

It could be the only time you get the chance to eat an overpriced lentil salad within sight of Deborah Meaden... 🌱



Corrugated iron shpherd's hut, a snip at £300,000

PHOTOS: SHUTTERSTOCK; ALAMY