



Photos Marcus Harpur

CONCEPT GARDENS AT HAMPTON COURT 2011

TIM RICHARDSON ANALYSES THIS YEAR'S CONCEPTUAL CATEGORY

THE CONCEPTUAL GARDENS at Hampton Court just keep on getting better and better – this year, the nine horticultural installations attained an even higher level of execution than in previous years' impressive showings. They also sat much more happily in the space allotted, with ample areas of green grass between the exhibits and a strong sense of flow and purpose. The conceptual garden section also had the feeling, for the first time, of being an enclosed and discrete part of the show, while the various shapes and sizes of the plots themselves created an appealing contrast with the rather rigorous avenue typology which tends to be used for 'main' gardens at RHS shows.

It also helped that there were no ice cream vans in the way, as has previously been the case. The sponsorship of Tropicana – and therefore its juice bar – had also waned, with the RHS now taking the hit for the £6,000 budget per garden. However, there is no way these gardens were built on that budget. Surely the RHS

needs to increase the funding level next year? Around £15,000 would be sensible. It seems astonishing and immoral that a Chelsea show garden can cost an average of £150,000 to £200,000 to create (with some hitting budgets of £400,000 this year) while in several cases still offering considerably less to the visitor than these gardens do. There were mutterings from several of the conceptualist designers this year that one or two of the gardens in this section turned out to have been (effectively) sponsored, when most entrants were under the impression that that was strictly verboten. Something has gone awry there, it appears.

The conceptualist gardens at Hampton Court have been having a subtle effect on the main show gardens for several years, in that ideas expressed through materials have become an increasingly important facet. The main show gardens at Hampton Court this year were probably the best there have ever been, which is not unrelated to the fact that so many of them

used a strident underlying design narrative. Some of the boldness that you see in the 'small' gardens at these shows has also carried over into the main show-garden arena. In fact, in terms of pure design, the Hampton Court gardens were more interesting overall than those at Chelsea, though the latter still leads the way when it comes to planting. Perhaps this conceptual turn is an indication of the way show gardens will go in the coming decades.

Making a statement

The most startling garden in the category, and the deserving winner of the best garden award, was Dan Lobb's memorable 'Landscape Obscured', a subtle title for a subtle piece which

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Left: The Bright Idea by Tom Harfleet
Right: CoppaFeel! by Hugo Bugg

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Above left: Excuse Me While I Kiss the Sky by Bestique (Anoushka Felier)
Above top right: Picturesque by Melissa Jolly
Above bottom right: Think! Cover Up by Nicola Greaves, Camilla Moreton and Andrew Cook