

40 years at Chelsea

This is the final year that one of the UK's leading bulb nurseries, Broadleigh Gardens, stages a display at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show – after four decades of continuous exhibiting

Author: **Nigel Colborn**, writer and broadcaster

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show is almost here and, in a few weeks, the media will gush over the latest garden designs. But while many visitors gasp at the Show Gardens' six-figure price tags, plant enthusiasts pay more attention to the floral glories that light up the Great Pavilion.

Those exhibits, so varied and distinctive, are what keep the word 'flower' in the title of the world's most famous horticultural event. Many are staged by independent family firms, and when any long-standing regular drops out, the show is inevitably a little diminished.

One such nursery, Broadleigh Gardens, will stage its last RHS Chelsea Flower Show exhibit next month, after almost 40 years. It will be missed, not just because its bulb displays are always fascinating, but because it is unlikely to be replaced. Luckily for gardeners, however, the nursery will continue to trade as usual.

Steeped in bulb-growing

Broadleigh Gardens has been owned since 1972 by Lord and Lady Skelmersdale but its history goes back further. Alec Gray, a Cornish grower, began to breed miniature daffodils in the 1930s. Many are still grown – his *Narcissus* 'Tête-à-tête' remains the world's most popular miniature.

The Gray collection was bought in the mid-1960s by Walter Stagg, and it was he who sold his Taunton nursery to Roger and Christine Skelmersdale in 1972. 'We were married in February and bought the nursery in May,' Christine says. Such life-changing steps in rapid succession might daunt the faint-hearted, but not the Skelmersdales. And for Christine, who had begun a teaching career, the switch to horticulture must have come as a surprise.

Her first experience of the Chelsea Flower Show was also in 1972, as a visitor. 'Three months after our wedding I was in suit and hat, being introduced as the "new wife" to people at the show.' Thereafter, she became a regular exhibitor, juggling the demanding jobs of raising small children, running a nursery and contributing to a busy shows calendar. 'I often had to keep our children on the

Broadleigh Gardens' 2010 display in the Great Pavilion at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show (right). Early bulbs are held back in cold storage and summer bulbs are forced to have them in bloom together.



RHS / BELLE PHOTO



GARDEN NEWS

Christine with an early 1970s exhibit in the RHS Lawrence Hall, Westminster.

stand with me, during build-up.' Nursery skills – in both senses – were quickly learned, and since 1980, when Roger went to work in Government, Christine's hand has remained on the tiller. Family were often recruited to help with exhibiting, including, for years, both her parents.

Like her parents, Christine has a talent for communicating. Through books and lectures she has encouraged thousands of gardeners to grow more bulbs, and her sparkling enthusiasm and knowledge can persuade even the most hesitant. She is unequivocal, too, and can condemn a plant she dislikes with such conviction that if you happen to grow it, you'll resolve to uproot the offending item the moment you get home.

Asked about her proudest moments, Christine mentions receiving the Victoria Medal of Honour, the Society's highest award. 'But my best achievement,' she says, 'was helping save Bristol Botanic Garden. We got the university to accept its responsibility and managed to relocate and develop it as the world's newest botanic garden. I'm proud of the part I played in that.'

Work within the RHS

In 1991 she was asked to join RHS Council, an onerous undertaking for a full-time nursery owner. 'It never occurred to me to refuse,' she says, 'because the Society and staff had always been so supportive. Besides, there was much to be done. To mark the event, my mother gave me a wooden spoon and told me to "go and stir". So I did.'

During her 11-year stint, while membership grew strongly (reaching 323,000 in 2002 from 161,000 in 1991), she was involved in major developments at Rosemoor, and with scrapping Chelsea's ageing canvas (it was last used in 1999). 'The old marquee was like a sailing ship,' she says. 'It had masts and ropes everywhere, and creaked in the wind. The new structure is so much lighter, higher, roomier – a truly Great Pavilion.'

For small nurseries, RHS Flower Shows are good promotional tools. Broadleigh Gardens, like so many, has benefited, not just from plant sales, but from the publicity that comes with being at a national event. Although it is easy to measure financial turnover, less-tangible



RHS / TIM SANDALL

Christine Skelmersdale (above) at work in Broadleigh Gardens, near Taunton, Somerset. The nursery is mail-order only, but there is a small plant sales area and the 2ha (5 acre) display gardens are open Monday to Friday.

Chelsea Flower Show

benefits are difficult to quantify. Christine has noticed how television has shifted public focus to the show gardens. While crowds throng round those most-recently featured on screen, floral exhibitors can feel neglected. 'We often pray for rain,' she says, 'to bring visitors into the Pavilion.'

When Christine describes what it takes to stage an exhibit, it is easy to see how that can drain the resources of a small business. 'To display 3,000 bulbs, we must grow at least 9,000,' she says. 'Chelsea isn't a natural time for early bulbs, so we rent cold storage. Plants have to be held back in warm spells, or urged on if it's cold. Bulbs grow an inch a day at the show, so we must allow for that. And while the show is open, you're on your feet 12 hours a day, all week, with little time for a break.'

'Not doing Chelsea will give us time to develop our business. We'll still be at other shows – Tatton Park at *Agapanthus* time, for instance – and the nursery won't slow down. I want to do more daffodil breeding, and to source more really good plants. There are too few nurseries growing species lilies, an area I want to explore. I also want to develop the garden – not in a controlled way, but enthusiastic, passionate, heart-ruling-head.'

Christine will be relieved not to suffer the stress of the Chelsea Flower Show but she'll miss the buzz. 'And there's

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RHS / TIM SANDALL



Broadleigh's *Agapanthus* at the RHS Flower Show Tatton Park.

also that special moment,' she says, 'where I can stand back, look over our completed stand and say, "Mmm. Not bad. You've done a good job there, girl!".' Who would not miss the sense of accomplishment at the world's top flower show? ●

RHS Online **RHS Chelsea Flower Show** (sponsored by M&G Investments) 22–26 May. Visit www.rhs.org.uk/shows for more. Tickets: 0844 338 7506

❖ **Hillier Nurseries** holds the record for awards at Chelsea Flower Show with 66 consecutive Golds. Its 2012 exhibit, 'Duel and the Crown', celebrates HM The Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympic Games with a fencing theme.

BROADLEIGH GARDENS

Barr House, Bishops Hull, Taunton, Somerset TA4 1AE; 01823 286231; www.broadleighbulbs.co.uk

❖ Mail-order nursery with limited plant sales area; a 2ha (5 acre) display garden and the National Plant Collection of *Narcissus* (Alec Gray hybrids) is open Mon–Fri, 9am–4pm.

Key plant groups grown by Broadleigh

❖ **Daffodils and small bulbs.** Besides such dwarf selections as *Narcissus* 'Sun Disc', 'Jumble', 'Tête-à-tête' and 'Hawera', Broadleigh Gardens lists historic daffodils including winter-flowering *N. 'Rijnveld's Early Sensation'* (right, top) and Tenby daffodil (*N. obvallaris*). The nursery carries a sizeable snowdrop collection from freaky but sought-after cultivars including *Galanthus nivalis* f. *pleniflorus* 'Blewbury Tart' to such distinctive species as *G. elwesii* var. *monostictus*. Other spring and winter bulbs include *Muscari*, *Crocus*, *Allium*, *Erythronium* and *Ipheion*. The summer catalogue is equally diverse, ranging from *Agapanthus* to *Zantedeschia*.

❖ **Californian irises.** Nearly a dozen wild beardless iris species occur on North America's Pacific Coast. Two in particular, predominantly yellow *Iris innominata* and blue or pink *I. douglasiana*, have been used to develop cultivars of surpassing beauty. They prefer neutral to acid soil, rich in organic matter. Nursery originals include such selections as coppery pink *I. 'Broadleigh Rose'* and distinctive peach and claret *I. 'Broadleigh Lavinia'* (right, middle). More recent introductions include *I. 'Broadleigh Nancy'*, white with strong purple markings, and *I. 'Broadleigh Angela'*, which has large, pale lilac flowers washed with deeper purple and blue.

❖ **Agapanthus.** This genus has increased greatly in popularity over recent years, partly because agapanthus make such good container plants for small gardens or furnishing summer terraces. Broadleigh Gardens offers tall cultivars such as deep blue *Agapanthus* 'Ben Hope' and darker A. 'Bressingham Blue', as well as more unusual dwarf A. 'Peter Pan'. The nursery's own introductions include A. 'Aimee' (right, bottom) and distinctive A. 'Snow Shadows' with dark stems and white flower-heads that appear pink as they fade. The RHS Flower Show Tatton Park (18–22 July) is the place to see the best displays.



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