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GREEN-FINGERED FEMALES BRING THEIR SKILLS TO CHELSEA

ELLESTYLL

DIVA

What images do the words Chelsea Flower Show conjure up for you? Perhaps it's magenta fascinators and awkward royals with their noses in roses? London's annual exhibition is associated with an idea of English society, a salmon terrine of "green and pleasantness" that we are told is quintessential to our country's identity.

What might not immediately spring to mind is queerness. Charlotte Harris is changing that. The queer landscape designer is leading an all-female, all-LGBT design team at this year's show. They are presenting a garden inspired by wildness and overgrowth.

"More bush – might that be the message?" I pose to Charlotte after seeing a sketch of her show garden. It depicts a plot teeming with life; verdant trees clutch branches around blue water, boulders muscle between springing rushes and a wood cabin peaks imploringly through leaves.

"Loose and free and wild is the message..." she responds. "Great gardens, for me, aren't spaces that feel meticulously over-managed. I'm interested in edges of places. The margins are always the most interesting places; how we live alongside them and embrace them, rather than attempt to tame them."

Harris is from a gold lineage of LGBT gardeners; she counts Derek Jarman among her gardening queeroes – the artist, gardener and filmmaker, "whose garden at Prospect Cottage in Dungeness is a place of stark and other-worldly beauty". Vita Sackville-West is up there too, the novelist, garden-designer and lover of Virginia Woolf. Harris also urges us to Google Constance Spry and Charlotte Mendelson for sapphic greenspiration.

Queer life insists on the knowledge of margin and edge. With her garden, Charlotte is subverting the traditional gerbera. "I knew I wanted an all-female design team," she explains. "Main Avenue, where the largest Chelsea Show gardens are positioned, is a bit of a male bastion. In 2015, the Guardian reported that, 'in more than 225 Main Avenue show gardens since 2000, only about 60 had any participation by women designers, and only one, Sarah Eberle, gained the coveted Best in Show'."

She is delighted that everyone in her all-female design team also defines as lesbian or queer. "We have Julia

DORA MORTIMER CHATS TO QUEER LANDSCAPE DESIGNER CHARLOTTE HARRIS AHEAD OF THIS YEAR'S CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW

Feix who is designing the pavilion, landscape architect Daisy Parsons, and horticulturist Alys Fowler."

We talk a bit about the pleasing nominative determinism of the team, a bunch replete with a Daisy! "It's funny," says Charlotte, "when we started seeing each other [writer and gardener Alys Fowler is also Charlotte's girlfriend] my phone wouldn't stop autocorrecting Alys's name to Flower!"

The two went to Ontario to re-search their show garden, which takes inspiration from the Canadian boreal – the world's largest intact forest. Charlotte's will be the seventh Main Avenue garden that the Royal Bank of Canada has sponsored to raise awareness of the preciousness of freshwater resources, via their RBC BlueWater project.

"I started working on the design in June 2016. I spent the summer exploring design routes and researching the plants that you might find in this area, but it wasn't until I travelled to northern Ontario, and explored the boreal by float plane, on foot and by canoe, that the design really started to take shape," she explains.

Harris's garden has some plants in it that were introduced to her by an Ojibwe guide who travelled with them on part of their journey. She talks about what a privilege it was to explore the forest with her and find out how plants were traditionally used for food, medicine, ceremony and building materials.

With climate change escalating from a pressing concern to a probable harbinger of the apocalypse (a reputable study predicts catastrophic change by 2047), an urgent re-think of our relationship with nature is needed.

Don't overgarden is Charlotte's advice for sustainable gardening. "Let things grow long and loose, and don't cut back your perennials in autumn – wait until spring. Plant things that encourage insects and pollinators because they are the starting-point of the wildlife food chain. Have a pond, however small. Compost everything you can. Don't pave over your front yard if you are lucky enough to have one. Buy from peat-free nurseries. Minimise the use of plastic in your garden – chairs, pots, you name it. There are some much better alternatives out there that are far kinder to our world."

Might plants teach us to be better humans? "The garden teaches you about rhythm of the seasons and patience. Even if it's just for 20 minutes before the day starts, I try and spend time there. I experienced intense depression following the death of my parents in my 20s, and continue to manage that black dog. Working with plants is my armour."

I'm wondering about this idea of wildness. It's a romantic one and one that feels very far away from London, the city in which Charlotte's garden will find its habitat. I ask whether she has decided what the word wild means to her?

"I think here in the UK much of the countryside – the land we assume to be wild – is managed on some level. The mind-blowing thing about exploring the Canadian boreal is that it goes on forever; it really is the wilderness. But really, the concept of 'wilderness' is a western industrial revolution construct to define any land that is 'unproductive', and something that was elevated by Victorian artists to situate their ego. This gives us the sense that we have dominion over places, when we absolutely don't! Everywhere across the world where there is wilderness, there are indigenous communities, like the Ojibwe, who have lived in harmony within the landscape for thousands of years."

Harris appears to have found her own sort of harmony. She talks about being happiest gardening with footie on the radio, or whilst listening to the Archers. By night she moonlights with her gay indie club outfit, Pink Glove, in Dalston, so if it's not Radio 4, it's her perennial love of Pulp that joins her on the lawn or a bit of Kate Bush – naturally.

She speaks fizzingly about Alys and their shared love of greening things:

"Alys has a brilliant mind and her knowledge is encyclopaedic. She is so accomplished at explaining the complex in a way that is clear and generous and memorable, which is one of the many things I love her for. And apparently she finds it deeply sexy that I make such good compost, so make of that what you will."

Thanks Charlotte, we will! *rushes to garden centre* 📍

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show runs 23-27 May. See [rhs.org.uk](https://www.rhs.org.uk) for more information.

"The garden teaches you about the rhythm of the seasons and patience"

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