

The Chelsea Flower Show leaves its organiser little time for his own garden, writes Jane Owen

ANDREW LAWSON



Stephen Bennett in his garden in West Sussex with his wife Johanna. "The irony is, my work at the Royal Horticultural Society keeps me from doing very much gardening"

# The ultimate showman

Stephen Bennett is the man who chooses the champagne for the Chelsea Flower Show gala. All 4,000 bottles of it — and they are consumed during one heady evening at the start of the show.

Bennett and his staff of about 20 also run the Chelsea Flower Show itself and all eight Royal Horticultural Society shows nationwide, including the new one this year at Tatton Park, near Manchester. The opulent galas, which have become a feature of the Chelsea and Hampton Court shows, raise money for charity and add a certain glamour, as does Bennett, whose matinee-idol looks cause discreet swooning in certain RHS departments.

It is difficult to pinpoint who came up with the idea of staging galas, but they began a couple of years after Bennett's arrival at the society.

When work allows, Bennett retreats to his large, airy Edwardian semi in Haywards Heath, West Sussex, bought when the four Bennett sons outgrew the last house.

At the front a large *Pittosporum* opens its tiny black flowers around now to fill the street with the scent of honey. Opposite the *Pittosporum*, a bed is filled with strawberries, iris, bergenia, mind-your-own-business, clematis and camellia, the last two planted by Bennett.

To the back of the house, in a strip running beside the extension, is a cool gravel area with three bays and six strategically placed pots. "I call it the beach," says Bennett. He laid the attractive curved brick path around one end of the gravel area. Beside the house, a cauldron boils over with strawberries, and ivy from a window-box grows up the wall.

"One of the societies left the windowbox behind at Chelsea about eight years ago. I tried to get it back to them but ...", says Bennett.

The main area of the back garden is a rough lawn with boundary hedges of laurel, conifer and holly. In

## ME AND MY GARDEN: STEPHEN BENNETT



Terracotta pots and gravel walks keep maintenance to a minimum

the centre of the lawn stands a sturdy wooden table and benches.

"My wife, Johanna, chose the garden furniture. She saw it at the Hampton Court Flower Show and bought it," says Bennett reminding me that, unlike Chelsea where nothing as vulgar as commerce is supposed to take place, trade is permitted at Hampton Court.

Dotted around this area are bamboo paraffin torches, mementos of summer parties thrown by the Bennett boys when they were not playing football. Bennett regards teenagers as his most serious garden pest, although one of his sons, Matthew, and his flatmate, Mark, have just spent a week working in the garden with Bennett.

They have transformed what once appeared to be a small Viking burial mound beside a hawthorn into an alpine bed backed by conifers. And they have planted clematis to curl up through the apple and sycamore.

It is only at weekends that Bennett

**"I'm a great planner but I never seem to put my plans into practice in my own garden"**

has time to garden. "I like doing all the destructive jobs, like pruning, weeding and mowing. I come in late during the week but in the summer, if the sun is still up when I get home, Johanna and I sit out here with a glass of wine and I have a cigar. I don't do any gardening then, I am too tired. I do the gardening at weekends," says Bennett.

"I'm a great planner but I never put my plans into practice. The irony



at the Bennett's house, right

is that my work at the Royal Horticultural Society stops me doing as much gardening as I would like."

His interest in plants began in Calcutta, where he grew up. Not that he had any practical involvement — servants tended to the garden.

After coming to the UK to train as a teacher, he got a job with Oddbins to pay his way through college. "By the time I'd finished there I had tasted my way around the world — 4,000 wines," says Bennett.

So his current job combines three of his skills to perfection: education (one of the RHS's main functions), gardening and wine. "I was selling booze and I realised that it didn't matter to me what I was selling. I was in Liverpool opening the first Oddbins shop when the garden festival was going up. I got talking to someone from the RHS who invited me to London to meet Christopher Brickell, the director general.

"Out of a discussion, which was supposed to put me in a retailing

position at the RHS, came the idea that someone should be in charge of shows. At the time the shows sort of happened. It still sends shivers down my spine — there was so little control. Chelsea was hugely popular and very overcrowded and dangerous. I had the last of what I call the big bad years — '80 and '87," says Bennett.

And so he introduced limited numbers and charged RHS members who had, until then, been able to visit the show free. Both were considered controversial moves at the time.

Bennett continues to be controversial — at least his urge to start flower shows nationwide raised a few eyebrows. "If the demand is there we will come in — part of the remit of the RHS is to educate. We lose money on the shows for about five years and so it's a huge investment to make. Tatton Park has been launched this year because there is nothing else like it in the northwest. We are calling it 'Chelsea comes to Cheshire'."

But where will all this megalomania end? He says: "We feel that each region should have a flagship show, but if there isn't a big enough audience, we will not be able to invest. We make a profit from Chelsea and Hampton Court, we share a profit on Malvern, and all the other shows we make a loss on."

### CHELSEA OFFER

The Times and the RHS has a special package which includes 12 months RHS Membership and two tickets to the Chelsea Flower Show on Friday, May 28 for just £53, a saving of £27. RHS Membership also includes:

- A one-year subscription to *The Garden* (worth £33)
  - Privileged tickets on members' only days at other RHS shows
  - Free entry to RHS gardens
- Call the 24-hour ticket hotline (0171-344 4343) and quote *The Times Chelsea Flower Show* offer.

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