

## Mercedes-Benz Retail

London • Birmingham • Manchester

**TIMES ONLINE**

**PRINT THIS ARTICLE**



[CLICK HERE TO PRINT](#)

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

July 24, 2004

### Giant steps

BY NOEL KINGSBURY

**There's turf sculpture, light shows . . . even a soundtrack. Fantasy? Maybe, but not all Westonbirt's avant gardeners are afraid to get their hands dirty**

For those who feel oppressed by the crowds and hurly-burly of the Chelsea Flower Show, the show gardens at Westonbirt Arboretum in the heart of Gloucestershire, surrounded by mature trees and wildflower meadows, appear to be an ideal antidote.

But don't expect to see traditional gardens there, for the annual Westonbirt Festival of the Garden, which runs throughout the summer, is at the cutting edge of garden design's avant-garde. Many of its exhibits explore the grey area between gardening and installation art and are guaranteed to provoke discussions of the "but is it gardening" variety.

However, the show also aims to present "ideas to steal", a slogan lifted from the publicity of the International Festival of Gardens in Chaumont-sur-Loire, on which the event is closely modelled. So what ideas are there in this year's 14 gardens for those of us wanting to design, plant and manage our own plots?

My eye was immediately drawn to the "Daisy" garden, where the German designers Petra Bittkau and Friedrich Bartfelder use turf as a sculptural material. Their grass-covered rectangles, inset with bright plastic squares, provide a strong vertical element to the garden as well as novel seating. This technique works well for a one-summer "installation", but does not survive long-term, as grass grown on a vertical surface develops bald patches with time. But since we seem happy enough to plant petunias in May and throw them on the compost heap in November, why not make a grass sculpture for a single season? Well made, as with this garden, it can also serve as garden furniture or a location for children's play.

I also loved the illuminated lawn in "Further from home", where the grass is spattered with tiny points of light in a variety of colours, as if the night sky has transferred to the ground. The effect is created using fibre-optic technology, which offers possibilities for different colours, patterns (stellar constellations, perhaps), even winking on and off. Those who enjoy experimenting with low-voltage power supplies and electronics have a new, and creative, world open to them.

Since the show's inception in 2002, the siting of the gardens — scattered over a large grass area, with little sense of place for each garden — has been a problem for designers. James Alexander-Sinclair's solution in his "Hole in the Ground Garden" — digging down

TIMES ONLINE

Don't miss  
the best  
events  
across  
Europe



to create a private, discrete space — is original and effective. Sunken spaces are rarely used in gardens these days. Of course, you must be sure that your sunken garden is not going to fill with water. But they are an excellent way of creating privacy, establishing gradients on a flat site and concentrating your vision on the sky. This garden takes the approach to an extreme, with steep banks that had me worried about soil erosion, but it was good to be encouraged to look down at border plants rather than straight at them.

“Windshore”, a maritime-inspired garden, makes imaginative use of long tapes (similar to the hummer lines used for scaring birds from newly sown lawns), adding a soundtrack to the garden. How often do we think of adding sounds to our gardens? The hummer line in this garden probably helps to keep seagulls away, too, but this is made up for with the simple but effective gull-like sculptures made from folded pieces of metal foil. An adult and two children would have fun piecing these together in an afternoon.

The show also features interesting hard landscaping techniques, particularly the labyrinthine paths made of loose stone held together by wire mesh in the “Otherworld Garden” and the large concrete slabs in the “Red Cabbage Garden” — each slab has a different, organic shape and is supported above ground on pillars — a visually exciting alternative to using decking or wooden boardwalks for handling movement up and down slopes. Both techniques offer durable and possibly cheaper ways of creating garden walkways.

Planting at Westonbirt almost always takes a back seat, which is another way of saying that much of it is terrible, both in quality and plant selection. There is, however, invariably one plot at least that offers good planting ideas. This year it is Anna Radice and Patricia Lussier’s “Ha Happening”, where naturalistic mounds of earth covered in annual seedlings are dramatically crossed by neat lines of bedding plants — an abstract painting made into a garden, unusual and striking in its simplicity and sense of balance. In the face of today’s reaction against old-fashioned formality, it was a reminder that geometry can serve the contemporary just as well as the past, and that modernist shapes can work with annual plantings.

Westonbirt is a horticultural fashion show — ideas are often taken to extremes, with excess, absurdity and occasional pretentiousness, but look closely and you will find plenty of good, hard-working ideas. These are yours to steal.

*Westonbirt Festival of the Garden, Westonbirt Arboretum, Tetbury, Gloucestershire; 10am-6pm, until Sept 12. Adults £7.50, children £1 ([www.festivalofthegarden.com](http://www.festivalofthegarden.com))*

---

**Copyright 2004** Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' **standard Terms and Conditions** . Please read our **Privacy Policy** . To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from The Times, visit the **Syndication website** .