

Chelsea 2009

Sandra Hartey

The adventure began at Chelsea two years earlier. It took us through many lows and highs: at first, doubt about the feasibility of the project, then trepidation at the size of the task; dismay when heavy snow brought down polytunnels nurturing some chosen plants and, later, that vagaries of the weather meant that many of our selected plants would either be past their best or not ready. Of course, being Hardy Planters, everyone involved rose to the challenge with much hard work, although we felt mild panic when the mock-up revealed just how large an area there was to be planted up. What relief when suitable substitute plants were found, and what gratitude to the nurseries who offered them; what delight at the veritable sea of plants laid out around our stand, and satisfaction as it all came together over the six days of the build-up. Along with the excitement of press day and the unexpected bonus of the royal presentation right in front of our stand, it all culminated in the triumph of a Gold Medal, only the third to be awarded to the Society in the 27 years we have been exhibiting at Chelsea.



© Denis Watson

The clever design and colour-themed planting.



A geranium rill.

The idea came from Monica Gerhold. In 2007, while still inspired by the spirit of this prestigious show, she suggested we might put together an exhibit featuring the Society's Specialist Groups. Though it was an excellent idea, I feared it would be a logistical and organisational nightmare, but in January 2008 we returned to it. All the Specialist Groups were prepared to contribute, with varying levels of active participation. Monica's final design, entitled 'An English Villa Town Garden,' featured a tranquil area of colour-themed herbaceous borders. A planted rill, bordered by a gravelled pathway, separated the two main planted areas. The path stepped up to a raised central area,

featuring a large terracotta pot, and, at the corners, four slatted columns, connected by arched crossbeams, were set in planted boxes. This clever design provided the opportunity to display clematis on the columns, and the planted rills would be a perfect place for hardy geraniums. The stepped levels meant it rose to a considerable height and was visible from a distance – the RHS are now keen on displays with height, as there is so much more headroom in the new pavilion. Happily the brief for our exhibit fitted in well with the RHS theme for this year's show – celebrating British horticulture.

We needed someone with a wide knowledge of plants as well as artistic flair to oversee acquiring the plants and the actual planting. Sue Ward immediately sprang to mind, because of her artist's eye for putting plants together and her plantsmanship, shown in her exquisite small garden in Hampshire. In July 2008 the team was formed: in addition to Monica and Sue, Dr Mary Toomey would provide her clematis expertise; Jennifer Harmer, the Society's historian, would compile the leaflet to accompany the display, incorporating information about the Specialist Groups as well as a plant list; Sally-Ann Turner would prepare the plant labels and Denis Watson, HPS shows coordinator, would oversee it all.

We got down to business and in October we heard that the RHS had accepted our application. Brian Hall of Northwood Trellis, who has worked with Monica in her capacity as a garden designer, undertook the construction of the stand with the

help of Paul, Monica's husband. It was decided not to rely on members to supply all the plants and we placed an order with Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants, who guaranteed that the plants would be in bloom at the right time. The clematis were ordered from Ockley Court Nursery. Mark Lyman, an HPS Hampshire member, supplied the delphiniums, and some plants came from a few other Hampshire Group members. The Hardy Geranium Group produced a wonderful collection of their specialities, as did the Variegated Plants Group including two nurserymen, Piers Bowley of Bowley Plants, in spite of the disastrous collapse of his polytunnels, and Bob Brown of Cotswold Garden Flowers.

In early April a mock-up of the stand was erected on Monica's drive, with empty pots placed in the scarily large planting areas to check how many plants we would need. Collecting the plants was a massive undertaking, with vans travelling in many directions. When the weather did its worst, Sue and Jennifer had to go hunting for replacements. Fortunately the nurserymen, including Kevin Hughes of Heale Plants and Nigel Rowland of Long Acre Plants, came up trumps. Plants came from Hampshire, Somerset, Surrey, Wiltshire and Worcestershire.

Once at Chelsea, the stand was constructed and the clematis were 'planted' – the deployment of these climbers was a masterpiece of deception. The pillars appeared to be covered in clematis growing in planters on the ground but, in addition, shelves were inserted all the way up inside the pillars, and plants, in pots painted the same blue-grey-green colour (mixed to Monica's recipe) as the pillars,



© Denis Watson

A pool of sunshine



Purple *Clematis Parisienne* and *Delphinium 'Spindrift'*



A corner of the gold side with *Aeonium arboreum 'Variegatum'*.

were placed on these shelves, about 130 plants in all! It's notoriously difficult to make clematis look realistic in show displays, so Sheila Chapman, who had recently retired after many years of exhibiting her clematis at Chelsea and other shows, gallantly travelled from Essex to help to arrange them.

We were surrounded by a vast array of plants. While Marcelle Maloney and Pam Heal from the Middlesex Group joined Jennifer and Monica in patiently 'dressing' the plants – removing weeds and dead or damaged leaves and generally tidying – Sue set about planting up the geranium rills, carefully grading the plants for height. The two large triangular planting areas were to be colour-themed: gold, yellow-variegated, green and white in one, and red, pink, silver and white-variegated in the other, with blue used as a highlight in both.

Sally-Ann had prepared a lot of labels in advance but many last-minute changes had to be made and she sat there day after day, at a little table, meticulously writing out new labels. As each area was planted the labels were placed, and the gaps between the plants were filled with crumpled newspaper, always a tedious and hand-blackening task. Finally, mulch was spread between the plants. The enormous terracotta pot, on loan from Italian Terrace, was wrestled into place by Paul, with the help of a conveniently available strong man from another stand. Paul tied the labels on to the clematis – a tricky task, as it was difficult to make them face the right way while also making it clear to which plant they

referred.

On Friday we learnt from Sue's husband, Dave, that we were on the RHS webcam, a video camera fixed high up in the Pavilion which constantly swept across part of it, and we were right in the middle. The message went winging round the Society: it was rather disconcerting to know that our every move was being watched! Among the visitors to our stand were our President, Roy Lancaster, and his daughter, Holly.

Paul spread the gravel on the paths and tamped it down, while Brian touched up the paint. On Sunday night it was all finished. The end result was wonderful to behold: the gold side was quite dazzling – amidst the gloom of the lashing rain and fierce winds outside, it looked like a pool of sunshine. The subtler colours of the red/pink/silver side included a brand new plant from Kevin Hughes, *Actaea pachypoda* 'Pewter & Pearls', its name aptly describing the leaves and the fruit. The surrounding astrantias and peonies set it off beautifully. The terracotta pot showed off a magnificent example of the recently introduced *Podophyllum* 'Kaleidoscope'.

We were told that the Queen would be going past our stand, but it turned out to be even more exciting. On the Monday evening, the Queen presented Prince Charles with the RHS's most prestigious award, the Victoria Medal of Honour, with our stand as the backdrop. So, in all the photographs and the coverage on television and on the web, the HPS exhibit was seen by millions of people. The judging took place on Monday afternoon. The next morning Denis and his wife Susan were the first to the stand and they waited for Sue and Jennifer, to see their reaction to the resplendent Gold Medal. According to one of their number, the judges had taken only a few seconds to decide on the colour of



Front cover of the exhibit leaflet, drawn by Sue Ward.



© Sandra Hartley

You can see why this *Podophyllum* was named 'Kaleidoscope'.



Paeonia 'Buckeye Belle'

the medal; and during a talk on judging, he told his audience all to go and look at our stand, as it was one of the best in the show!

The leaflet for visitors gave a general introduction to the Society and information about the Specialist Groups – the Variegated Plants, Ranunculaceae, Hardy Geranium, Pulmonaria, Peony and Half Hardy Groups – and a list of the plants representing these Groups, as well as the plants chosen to complement them. Sue Ward's beautiful drawing on the front cover featured a plant from each Group. A full list of all the plants in the exhibit was put on the

HPS website – it's still there, if you haven't seen it yet, along with many more photographs than we can squeeze in here.

With no geographic base from which to draw members to act as stewards, we asked for helpers in the newsletter. There was a fantastic response but sadly, owing to the limited number of exhibitors' passes we were allocated, we couldn't get all the volunteers involved. The stewards were kept busy telling visitors about the HPS and the plants – the stand attracted an enormous amount of attention during the five days of the show, and many visitors expressed an interest in joining the Society.

All hands were needed for the 'breakdown' – the regular team, including Denis and the indispensable husbands, Paul and Dave, as well as Tony Rogers and Harry Brickwood from Essex, who'd become hooked on Chelsea after helping their Group in 2005. We were the last to leave the Pavilion, managing to depart just before midnight as they waited to lock the gates. The tremendous adventure was over, but the excitement lives on in our memories. We hope the thousands who saw the stand, and were enchanted by the plants and the artistry of their arrangement, may seek out some of the fabulous plants for their own gardens. 🌿

Sandra Hartley joined the HPS because of her passion for plants and gardening, but has become so involved in the Society in various capacities that her own garden has been sadly neglected. She hopes she is now getting her act together!