

Ursula Buchan

This sponsor knows about being up before the bench



NEIL HEPPWORTH

UNTIL ABOUT 30 YEARS AGO, there were still one or two private individuals who funded their own exhibits at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. In 1980, Maurice Mason, a farmer on a large scale in Norfolk, and the man after whom *Begonia masoniana* is named, filled the Monument site with a display of exotic plants from his own 18 glasshouses. In the process he won the Lawrence Medal, given to the best exhibit shown to the Society during the course of the year. Douglas Knight, who laid out beautiful rock gardens between 1987 and 1998 on the (guess what) Rock Garden Bank, was the last small businessman to fund his own show garden, I suspect. Since then, the cost of show gardens, even small ones, has ballooned so much that sponsorship deals with large companies, institutions or charities are the norm.

Sponsorship has its good points, of course, since few private individuals have the dough to spend at least £150,000 on a large show garden, but it has sometimes led to some quite quirky designs. I have never forgotten – in the early days of mobile telephones – a telecommunications company sponsoring a garden that boasted a water feature in the shape of a handset, nor the fragrance company that had a fountain reminiscent of a perfume bottle. I trust there will be nothing so clunky this year (although I wouldn't bet money on it), but there are bound to be nods in the direction of the sponsor – overt or otherwise – especially if the organisation has a particular reason for wanting the publicity that goes with a Chelsea garden.

I am a Justice of the Peace, so I am keen to see the small Urban Garden sponsored by the Magistrates' Association. The association wants to raise awareness of the fact that JPs have been dispensing justice, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will (as the oath we swear has it) since 1361. 'The Magistrate's Garden' has been created by Kate Gould, a most talented designer, but she is lucky to have been gifted an obvious play on words, and need not therefore be too heavy-handed. All good gardens have some seating in them, so I know there will be a place for The Bench.

IS THERE A BETTER PLANT for containers than a viola? If so, I should like to know it. I am just about to remove my violas from containers in order to plant them up with summer annuals, so this is a good moment to pay tribute. I planted the reliable *Viola* 'Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow' in early October; it is hard to get all the name on the label, but it refers to the enchanting way the flowers change colour daily – white to pale blue to dark blue. They were flowering then and only hunched their shoulders and turned inwards during the intense cold and snow in late November and December. As temperatures rose slightly after Christmas they bounced back into flowering and have continued vigorously ever since, accompanying first crocuses, then dwarf narcissi and finally tulips. That really is not bad for plants that cost only 50 pence each. ■

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i Read a profile of Maurice Mason (1912–1993) by RHS Historian Brent Elliott in the current issue of *The Plantsman*, sister publication to *The Garden*. For more, search 'Plantsman' at www.rhs.org.uk or call 020 7821 3401



JENNY BOWERS

Garden talk

Geoff Hodge

There's a product for that...

GARDENERS LOVE THEIR TOYS – their gizmos, accessories and gadgets. Well, that's if you believe the manufacturers and the number of new ones that appear on the market every year. There are hundreds of them. Sadly, most of them are a complete waste of space – and that is being kind to some.

I have had a keen interest in gardening products since managing a garden centre back in the 1980s – looking at what products to stock and, more importantly, which ones sell. Currently I test gardening products and previously was a magazine's new product editor. It sounds fun and it is, but every year I end up with a garage full of utter tat. When writing about a new product there is always a dilemma – do I say it is rubbish, and live in fear of being sued, or do I just relegate it to the trash and not even mention it? Usually, the latter, as I don't fancy ending up in jail.

Sometimes a 'new' product is just a re-invention of something that has been around for donkey's years. Sometimes – and sadly rarely – it really is a new innovation, something that gets me all excited and actually makes gardening easier or more interesting.

Of the best innovations in recent years, for which I am thankful in my gardening, my top four are: rotating-handle secateurs; snap-on interchangeable tool systems; lithium-ion battery-operated electric tools, especially lawnmowers; and, because I suffer with a bad back, ergonomically designed gardening tools – the ones that look as if they have been run over by a bus and bent into bizarre angles.

As the garden-show season gears up into full swing, I wonder how much hard-earned cash is splashed out on new gadgets at a show, or if most gardeners just walk away from the stand instead and have a good titter about it.

Of course, new products are the lifeblood of the gardening industry, which in the UK is worth £4–5 billion per year. I just wish someone would actually have a proper think about whether this gizmo or that contraption is something that we actually need, or whether it should be dumped in Room 101 and dispatched to oblivion.

It is a bit like all the new plants and cultivars that get launched to unsuspecting gardeners each year – but please don't get me started on that one... ■

Geoff Hodge is a freelance garden writer, author and broadcaster, with a special interest in gardening products



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