

NATIONAL AUTISTIC SOCIETY PRESS RELEASE
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National Autistic Society Garden to raise awareness of masking at RHS Chelsea

Show garden aims to build understanding of masking, a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, in order to fit in and be accepted in society.



Illustration: Kate Slater

The National Autistic Society is aiming to raise awareness of autism and masking with a show garden at the world famous RHS Chelsea Flower Show.

The garden is a collaboration between the charity and co-designers Sophie Parmenter, and Dido Milne, Director of CSK Architects.

The National Autistic Society Garden is sponsored by Project Giving Back, a unique grant-making charity that provides funding for gardens for good causes at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show from 21 – 25 May 2024.

After this year's show, the garden will be relocated to one of the charity's supported living sites at Catrine Bank alongside the river Ayr in Scotland.

Masking is a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic in order to fit in and be accepted in society. However, masking can come at a great cost for autistic people because it relies on suppressing natural behaviours and instincts, needs, preferences and coping mechanisms, which can result in exhaustion, mental health difficulties, a loss of sense of self and low self-esteem.

The show garden seeks to represent autistic masking and how autistic people experience this in different parts of their lives. Walls or 'masks' of timber and cork create a series of spaces dedicated to different types of social interaction.

There is a large, covered space for family or friends, an intimate corner for a quiet conversation with a partner or for sitting by yourself and a more formal space for colleagues. A mesmerising kinetic sculpture alludes to the mind's beauty and complexity. These three outer spaces surround the heart of the garden, a sheltered and mossy dell that embodies the space of the inner mind.

There is a large team collaborating on the project, including autistic people and people who have family or friends who are autistic. Autistic people are involved in developing the message and ethos of the project, as well as the creation of the garden itself.

Co-designer and botanist, Sophie Parmenter, said: "RHS Chelsea Flower Show offers an opportunity to break new ground as a designer, enjoying the creative freedoms involved in making a show garden. It also affords a chance to challenge the industry's traditions and to push for innovation in sustainable design.

"We are delighted to have a show garden at Chelsea, and to have the opportunity to provide a platform for the National Autistic Society to talk about masking and late diagnosis, as well as promoting acceptance of autism in our society."

Co-designer and Director of CSK Architects, Dido Milne, said: "Sophie and I are passionate believers in the power of collaboration and have a shared interest in a holistic approach to environmental sustainability. We are thrilled to be now leading a talented and diverse team of designers, makers, growers and craftsmen who are bringing the National Autistic Society Garden to life.

"The inclusion of the cork screens or masks in the garden provides an opportunity to explore autistic masking and also allows us to design with a regenerative material life cycle. We're looking forward to the garden opening up conversations and increasing understanding about autistic people in society."



Co-designers Sophie Parmenter (left) and Dido Milne (right)

Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive of the National Autistic Society, said: "We are really excited to at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show this year to raise awareness of autism and masking.

"This is such an important issue and we want to build understanding of masking and the impact it can have on people's mental health, sense of self and self-esteem.

"We are incredibly grateful to Project Giving Back for sponsoring our garden, our co-designers Sophie and Dido and also the many suppliers and volunteers who are supporting the creation of our beautiful garden."

The National Autistic Society will be hosting a networking event at RHS Chelsea to celebrate the garden thanks to the support of Ernst Young.

More about the planting and materials used in the garden

The planting scheme of the National Autistic Society Garden is multi-layered, evolving from wetland meadow to river birch woodland, with a vibrant colour palette at its boundary soothing to softer hues at its heart, where textured curling bark sits alongside large crusted blocks of expanded cork.

The planting will create two distinct areas in the garden: The hidden 'inner room' with woodland planting, and the outer garden with bolder drifts of colour amongst grasses and sedges.

A strong ecological ethos runs through the garden, showcasing the circularity of regenerative systems and the interdependent relationship between natural ecosystems and man-made materials.

More about masking

Masking is a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic in order to blend in and be more accepted in society. Masking can happen in formal situations such as at school or work and in informal situations such as at home with family or socialising with friends.

Masking is sometimes referred to as 'camouflaging', 'social camouflaging', 'compensatory strategies' and 'passing'. Research suggests autistic people learn how to mask by observing, analysing and mirroring the behaviours of others – in real life or on TV, in films, books, etc.

Find out more about masking on the National Autistic Society's website:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking>

More about RHS Chelsea

RHS Chelsea Flower Show will take place from 21 – 25 May 2024 and is one of the most famous gardening events in the world.

It is the Royal Horticultural Society's flagship event and has been delighting garden and plant lovers for over 110 years.

ENDS

Illustration credit: Kate Slater

You can access photos of the garden via this link: [National Autistic Society Garden - Press Photos](#)

5 things to interest the senses in the National Autistic Society Garden at RHS Chelsea

Autistic people may experience sensory differences. If you are autistic, you may be over-sensitive or under-sensitive to specific sights, sounds, smells or textures. Our garden has a variety of different sensory experiences.

1. Sight

The **kinetic sculpture**, designed by Robert Moore, alludes to the mesmeric beauty and complexity of the mind.

2. Touch

The texture of the peeling bark of **River Birch** (*Betula nigra*) against the backdrop of the pitted walls of expanded cork and the gnarly texture of **Osier Willow** (*Salix viminalis*).

3. Sound

The construction of **the canopy** over the family pavilion creates the sound of running water. This water is channelled down a rain chain into a mossy dell at the heart of the garden. Listen also for the rustling of the leaves in the **River Birch** (*Betula nigra*).

4. Smell

The herbal scent of **Bog Myrtle/ Sweetgale** (*Myrica gale*) in the wetland meadow in front of the family pavilion. Its aromatic leaves can be used like bay leaves and it's a good nitrogen fixing plant too.

5. Taste

Although not designed primarily as an edible garden, all our planting and hard landscaping materials are non-toxic. For example, **Japanese Plum Yew** (*Cephalotaxus harringtonia 'Fastigiata'*) and **Udo** (*Aralia cordata*) - the young shoots can be eaten raw or cooked and are usually blanched to give crisp lemon-like slices.

Note: Pictures of the above on the garden will be available on request from Monday 20 May. Please email: press@nas.org.uk

What is masking?

The National Autistic Society Garden aims to raise awareness of autistic masking. Here we explain what masking is, the impact on autistic people and how our garden represents masking. Autistic people also explain what masking is like for them.

About the garden

Our garden seeks to represent autistic masking and how autistic people experience this in different parts of their lives. Walls or 'masks' of timber and cork create a series of spaces dedicated to different types of social interaction. There is a large, covered space for family or friends, an intimate corner for a quiet conversation with a partner or for sitting by yourself and a more formal space for colleagues. A mesmerising kinetic sculpture alludes to the mind's beauty and complexity. These three outer spaces surround the heart of the garden, a sheltered and mossy dell that embodies the space of the inner mind.

The theme: masking

The central space is separated from the outer spaces by cork screens, which represent an aspect of the autistic experience known as masking.

Masking is a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic in order to fit in and be accepted in society. However, masking can come at a great cost for autistic people because it relies on suppressing natural behaviours and instincts, needs, preferences and coping mechanisms, which can result in exhaustion, mental health difficulties, a loss of sense of self and low self-esteem.

How masking is represented in our garden

Planting

Co-designer Sophie Parmenter explains: "Cork walls/structures mask an inner sanctuary garden, a less 'edited' space with a mix of planting where an autistic person can be closer to their authentic self.

"The walls also define three outer gardens that each contain a 'controlled' subset of the full planting palette, and are designed for social interactions of differing scale and character."

Architecture

Co-designer Dido Milne, of CSK Architects, explains: "The family of cork masks are each composed from a set of blocks arranged in different ways to present alternative facades. There are glimpses through these 'masks' to an inner world beyond.

"Narrower at the base and wider at the top (an inherently unstable form) requires a hidden strength to maintain the structure, alluding to the mental toll exerted by continuously needing to mask to be accepted by society.

“The material itself, expanded cork, is bark from the cork oak tree. As a protective and attractive outer layer, bark offers a useful metaphor for autistic masking.”

Why it is important to raise awareness of masking

Helen Ellis is Moonshot Movement Lead at the National Autistic Society, and co-author of 'Autism and Masking: How and why people do it, and the impact it can have'. She explains: “The more the public learn about masking, the more people are likely to recognise when an autistic person is struggling in a situation or is not feeling safe enough to react naturally.

“We want every autistic person to feel accepted and valued as their authentic selves, and not feel that they have to use masking as a survival strategy to cope with daily life and avoid discrimination.”

Quotes from autistic people about masking

Ursula: “There is a huge gap in knowledge (even by health professionals) in terms of recognising how much many of us have had to mask to try and fit in and be acceptable to non-autistic people. They don't understand how costly that is to us, in terms of mental health, and how much energy that takes.”

Francesca: “Everyone masks to a degree; it's part of being human, but autistic masking is all-pervading, longer-lasting and for multiple reasons, including as a protective mechanism. Trying to identify where I have been masking is difficult as it has become such an intrinsic part of me now. I am noticing more and more where I am masking and the impact this has on me. It delayed my diagnosis, but I also feel tense, achy, drained, even unwell and I have reduced capacity to take care of my other needs. Constantly second-guessing, body-scanning, inner-talking, rehearsing, dumbing down my own needs, people-pleasing and trying to measure up to a socially-constructed, socially-accepted norm is simply not sustainable.

“When I'm not masking, I can feel calm, content, liberated and even energised. I'm being me and I'm not making myself smaller. It has to be in the right environment, though. It's a bit like a plant - if a plant is struggling to survive, you would change the environment. It's the same with autism. I can only bloom if the environment is hospitable.”

Rosalind: “Neurotypical people are more likely to have a natural ability to adapt to a given situation, through the 'normal' development of social skills throughout their lives. Autistic people often don't have that natural ability, social development is different, and so we are not able to adhere to social norms, rules and expectations; we have to learn it. This is done as a survival tool to get us through different situations in order to fit in, and it involves observing, copying, and rehearsing in order to then mask in a situation. While we are masking, we are highly self aware, often anxious, and are often listening to our inner monologue telling us what to do. So we are self monitoring things like how we stand, what our arms are doing, how we are responding verbally, how much eye contact we should or shouldn't give, what expression we should be making, stopping ourselves from interrupting (I'm a nightmare with this!), trying to process all the information we're receiving in order to

look socially competent, when a lot of the time we feel anything but. This pulls massively on our energy reserves, and can leave us exhausted. Masking for us is can also be deeply uncomfortable, both physically and mentally, because we're going against what we want to do naturally.

"Masking can lead to burnout, and that will inevitably affect mental health. In my life I've masked so much through trying to fit in and fulfil roles, that I have questioned who I really am, which has caused low self esteem, confusion, and depression. There have been times when it has all felt hopeless, and I feel so misunderstood and lost, that I haven't been able to find a way out; I've been incredibly low. I sometimes feel like I live in a world that isn't designed for me, because it confuses me, and I can't navigate it as well as I should. I don't fit in, I can't keep up, and I'm exhausted. This means that I've tended to stick to the side-lines, try to recover, and put my mask back on again; the problem being is that the whole cycle starts again. I do feel that as I learn more about myself, I can use tools I have learned to help break this cycle, but I understand that because I am who I am, poor mental health will always be a risk I have to manage very carefully."

Emma-Jane: "I masked so well that I created a neurotypical identity for myself to hide behind, but now I am slowly peeling it away."

Further information about masking

More information about masking is available on the **National Autistic Society website:**

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/behaviour/masking>

This includes:

- [What is masking?](#)
- [Why do autistic people mask?](#)
- [How common is masking in autistic people?](#)
- [The impact of masking](#)
- [Strategies for self-management](#)
- [How to support autistic people who mask](#)
- [Insight from autistic people](#)
- [Links, resources and article sources](#)



National Autistic Society Garden
Chelsea Flower Show 2024

Plant List

<i>Adiantum pedatum</i>	<i>Hypnum cupressiforme</i>
<i>Apium nodiflorum</i>	<i>Lunaria annua</i> 'Chedglow'
<i>Aralia cordata</i>	<i>Malus sylvestris</i>
<i>Astilboides tabularis</i>	<i>Matteuccia struthopteris</i>
<i>Athyrium filix-femina</i> subsp. <i>angustum</i> f. <i>rubellum</i> 'Lady in Red'	<i>Meconopsis</i> 'Ascreavie'
<i>Athyrium otophorum</i> var. <i>okanum</i>	<i>Meconopsis</i> 'Lingholm'
<i>Betula nigra</i>	<i>Molinia caerulea</i> subsp. <i>arundinacea</i> 'Karl Foerster'
<i>Blechnum spicant</i>	<i>Molinia caerulea</i> subsp. <i>arundinacea</i> 'Skyracer'
<i>Boehmeria spicata</i>	<i>Molinia caerulea</i> subsp. <i>arundinacea</i> 'Transparent'
<i>Camassia leichtlinii</i> 'Blue Danube'	<i>Molinia caerulea</i> subsp. <i>arundinacea</i> 'Torch'
<i>Camassia leichtlinii</i> 'Maybelle'	<i>Mukdenia rossii</i>
<i>Camassia leichtlinii</i> 'Blue Heaven'	<i>Myrica gale</i>
<i>Camassia leichtlinii</i> 'Sacajawea'	<i>Omphalodes cappadoccia</i> 'Cherry Ingram'
<i>Camassia quamash</i> 'Orion'	<i>Onoclea sensibilis</i>
<i>Camassia quamash</i> 'Blue Melody'	<i>Osmunda regalis</i>
<i>Cephalotaxus harringtonia</i> 'Fastigiata'	<i>Osmunda regalis</i> 'Purpureascens'
<i>Chrysosplenium davidianum</i>	<i>Polytrichum commune</i>
<i>Cornus alba</i> 'Sibirica'	<i>Primula beesiana</i>
<i>Cortusa matthioli</i>	<i>Primula bullesiana</i>
<i>Carpinus betulus</i>	<i>Primula bulleyana</i>
<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	<i>Primula japonica</i> 'Millers Crimson'
<i>Darmera peltata</i>	<i>Primula secundiflora</i>
<i>Diphylleia grayi</i>	<i>Primula sikkimensis</i>
<i>Disporum longistylum</i> 'Night Heron'	<i>Rhytiadelphus loreus</i>
<i>Elatostema umbellatum</i>	<i>Rubus</i> 'Black Satin'
<i>Epimedium grandiflorum</i> 'Lilafee'	<i>Salix viminalis</i>
<i>Epimedium x rubrum</i>	<i>Saxifraga pensylvanica</i>
<i>Erythronium dens-canis</i>	<i>Umbilicus oppositifolius</i>
<i>Eutrochium maculatum</i> (Atropurpureum Group) 'Purple Bush'	<i>Vaccinium corymbosum</i> 'Duke'
<i>Eutrochium maculatum</i> 'Red Dwarf'	<i>Viola riviniana</i> Purpurea Group
<i>Filipendula palmata</i> 'Goteburg'	<i>Weigela</i> 'Alexandra'
<i>Filipendula ulmaria</i>	<i>Weigela florida</i> 'Purpurea'
<i>Hylocomium splendens</i>	

Notes to editors

National Autistic Society Garden – **Site 325 on Main Avenue** at RHS Chelsea.

For more information, or to arrange interviews, please contact the National Autistic Society media team at press@nas.org.uk or call 0207 903 3593.

Useful links

- Visit the [National Autistic Society Garden website](#) for more information.
- [Further information about masking](#).
- More information about the [plants and materials used in our garden](#).
- The [National Autistic Society Garden on the RHS website](#).

About the National Autistic Society

- The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for autistic people.
- We are here to transform lives, change attitudes and create a society that works for autistic people.
- Since 1962, we have been campaigning for autistic people's rights and providing support and advice to autistic people and their families.
- To find out more about the charity and autism, visit www.autism.org.uk
- Follow the National Autistic Society's social media accounts on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Threads](#), [X](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [YouTube](#).

About autism

- Autism is a lifelong disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. Read our guidance on [how to talk and write about autism](#).
- At least one in 100 people are autistic which means more than 700,000 people in the UK.
- Autistic people have a range of strengths and challenges. For example, some autistic people also have a learning disability and may need support with daily tasks like washing, cooking or exercising. Other autistic people are in full time work and may benefit from reasonable adjustments.
- Autistic people may:
 - Face challenges with communication and social interaction
 - Be under- or over-sensitive to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light and colours.
 - Have highly focused interests or hobbies.
 - Have repetitive or restrictive behaviour.
 - Experience intense anxiety around unexpected change and social situations.
 - Experience 'meltdowns' or 'shutdowns'.

About Sophie Parmenter

Sophie runs Staffordshire based [Sophie Parmenter Studio](#), a landscape practice focussed on public space planting and garden design projects throughout the UK. The studio pursues a sustainable and regenerative approach to design that seeks to improve upon the existing biodiversity of a site, crafting a habitat-rich landscape where an imaginative, artistic approach to fulfilling a client's needs also allows local wildlife to flourish.

Sophie's approach is inspired by a lifelong love of wild places and natural landscapes, and she works, often in collaboration with architects and designers, to create gardens or planted landscapes respectful of their unique location and history. Certain themes run through her work - generous and naturalistic planting, married with an innovative approach to traditional crafts and natural materials.

Sophie has recently taken on the stewardship of a small farm in Staffordshire. This will function as a 'living lab' where the studio's work in both public space and private garden design will be complemented and informed by an experimental approach to regenerative land management and horticulture.

About Dido Milne

Dido Milne is a Director of [CSK Architects](#), an architectural studio relaunched in 2016 in Eton with a focus on a holistic approach to environmental design. Together with Matthew Barnett Howland (Director of R&D) they lead on innovative projects that express the complex relationship between architecture and natural ecosystems. They designed and built Cork House, a radical and widely acclaimed project that explores sustainability across the whole life of the building, from its origins in biodiverse cork forests through to its return to the earth in the far future. In 2019 Cork House was the winner of The Manser Medal AJ House of the Year, the American Institute of Architects' Sustainable Future Award and the RIBA Stephen Lawrence Prize, and was shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize.

Currently at **CSK Architects** they are working on a new 'live/work/grow' typology for an exemplar bio-dynamic farm and two circular economy stone re-use projects.

About Project Giving Back

Project Giving Back (PGB) is a unique grant-making charity that provides funding for gardens for good causes at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. PGB was launched in May 2021 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and its devastating effects on UK charitable fundraising - effects that have since been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. It will fund gardens inspired by a range of good causes at RHS Chelsea Flower Show from 2022 - 2026.

PGB will fund a total of 15 gardens at RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 2024 and intends to fund up to 60 gardens at the show from 2022 - 2026.

Project Giving Back was established with funding from two private philanthropists who are RHS Life Members and keen gardeners. They wish to remain anonymous. PGB will help UK-based good causes recover from the unprecedented effects of the global pandemic by giving them an opportunity to raise awareness of their work for people, plants and the planet at the high-profile RHS Chelsea Flower Show.