



PHOTOGRAPHS: RHS / BETHANY CLARKE

Judge and jury

RHS Flower Shows are highlights of the gardening calendar, with the awarding of medals a key part of the interest. How are floral displays and designed gardens judged, and how does the RHS ensure consistency?

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Whether you revel in the horticultural beauty displayed in the marquees – or the near perfection of show gardens – RHS Flower Shows provide a rich source of gardening delight.

Much of this is down to the designer, grower or supplier; ranks of statuesque delphiniums, immaculate vegetables and fruit, exquisite bonsai, modernist gardens or utopian re-creations of country gardens. But it is perhaps the accolade of a medal that confirms the quality of that display. From Bronze to Gold, from plant-group specific awards to 'Best in Show', the judging system rewards the gamut of skills required to put on such displays.

The judging process continually evolves, however, and over recent years a process of improvement – and transparency – has been established. It is clear that, with feedback from show visitors, exhibitors and television viewers, people want to know more about how the judges

award medals. The RHS has responded by reviewing the judging criteria and, in so doing, reassuring exhibitors and visitors alike that there is a consistency of approach across each display, and across each show.

The principal judging process is split into two: one set of criteria for the floral displays (in pavilions or marquees), where nursery exhibits are displayed; and another set for the outdoor gardens. Each panel of judges represents the diversity of knowledge and skill within the horticultural, gardening and design world; all judges have been trained by the RHS to consistently assess both detail and impact, and have to set aside personal preferences. For the gardens, there are two panels, each comprised of three assessing judges and four regular judges (plus a moderator who keeps watch to ensure consistency is applied throughout the judging process); in the marquees, there are five or seven people on a judging panel and multiple panels (plus independent moderators to ensure consistency).

If an exhibit or garden fails substantially then no award will be given; but others will range from Bronze, Silver and Silver-Gilt to Gold. Additional awards – for example, Best in Show, the President's Award, Product of the Year or Best Tradestand – are also given, but some of these are specific to individual shows. (For those show visitors with a long memory, some awards previously included the words 'Flora', 'Hogg' or even 'Knightian' on them, but this has now ceased.)

Judging plants and flowers

For most floral displays, the General Judging Criteria have been used for the last six years. Key areas that are taken into account include the endeavour of the display – for example, the level of difficulty in creating it, the difficulty in growing the plants used, any new ideas or originality that have been included. In addition, the colour, texture, health, range and relevance of plants on display are keenly scrutinised, as is the overall impression.

In addition to these 'general criteria', some floral awards can be judged on the Lindley Judging Criteria (exhibitors may ask to be judged on these criteria, but it is more likely that the floral judges will apply them to an exhibit, when relevant). At the start of the 19th century, John Lindley (1799–1865), botanist, editor and writer, worked for the Society for 42 years and ran the Society's training scheme for gardeners, so it is scientific and educational merit that is commemorated in this system. All the general criteria continue, but extra considerations examine the information and interpretation on a display, particularly the clarity of theme, signage and 'take home' messages. >>>

Judges at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show (above left) and RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show (above). Whether judging floral displays in the pavilion or show gardens outside, RHS judges must apply consistent criteria to every exhibit. The full judging criteria are available to all exhibitors.

Judging criteria across RHS Shows

To ensure consistency across the Society's shows, displays are judged in two primary ways: the General Garden Judging Criteria and, for floral displays, the General Judging Criteria. Descriptions help guide judges as to the most appropriate standard achieved for each element; they can award one of five grades (from 'excellent' to 'poor') to each criterion.

General Garden Judging Criteria SHOW GARDENS

1 Realisation of client's brief
Clarity and delivery of the vision

2 Ambition
Atmosphere, flair, originality, impact and theatre from the design

3 Overall impression
Choice of materials, polish and dressing

4 Design and layout plan of garden
Function, unity, dimensions and scale

5 Design, 3-D and spatial composition
How the scale, mass and void, volume and balance work together

6 Construction
The quality of build and finish

7 Planting design
Colour, texture, form, composition and overall visual impact of the planting

8 Plant associations
Relevance, species and cultural significance appropriate to the design and brief

9 Planting implementation
Is the quality, health and density of planting appropriate for this garden?

General Judging Criteria FLORAL EXHIBITS

a Plants
Colour and texture; quality; health (pests and disease); nomenclature/identification; association and relevance; range

b Overall impression
Impact (including creativity/theatre/artistic effect); unity, balance and scale; design, colour and texture; finish (pots, edging, labels, stand well filled, space well used)

c Endeavour
Levels of difficulty in creating the display; consideration of props used; difficulty in growing plants; originality and new ideas



Looking outside

Medals awarded to show gardens tend to receive most coverage – and most confusion. Not only are the gardens marked against the General Garden Judging Criteria (for topics such as design, quality of construction, planting; see p89), but they are also assessed on their written brief. Shows Judging Manager, Joanna Shirley says, 'All designers submit their brief, which includes a description of the garden and highlights its purpose, function and key plants and features so that assessing judges can ensure the garden they see is actually what was originally intended – and selected by the RHS.'

And this is where confusion can lie. If a brief, or description within it, are different to the show garden, then something has gone wrong. Judges need to see if that is for a legitimate reason (such as different plants) or if there has been a problem with the design concept. A garden that may look worthy of a Gold medal may actually get a Silver-Gilt because it does not quite match up to its brief.

Times have changed substantially for RHS shows. Where, once, a forthright judge could potentially encourage (or coerce) a committee to vote for a certain medal, the recently introduced consistent, criteria-based 'scorecard' approach is a huge improvement. These changes were implemented in 2009 for the floral displays; they were then examined and refined. The new garden criteria were trialled at RHS Flower Show Tatton Park in 2013. This year will be the second full year for the gardens and, on the whole, the criteria have been well received by designers and exhibitors. Floral and garden exhibitors both receive spoken feedback, and a 'tick sheet' summarising the criteria scores, so transparency in understanding the judges' decision is clear for them all.

Such changes – and future improvements – will ensure ongoing consistency. But the one thing they will never be able to alter is a visitor's personal reaction to a display; and that, for certain, will continue to be discussed and opined as only good gardeners can. ●

Judging in progress at BBC Gardeners' World Live (above). Whether for floral displays or show gardens, judging panels reflect a broad range of horticultural, gardening and design skills.

2015 Chelsea highlights

At this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show (sponsored by M&G Investments), several special anniversaries – including a half-century for one show judge – have inspired exhibitors, designers and floral displays.



30 years of clematis from Raymond Evison OBE VMH

Raymond's Guernsey-based clematis nursery began in 1985, and first exhibited at Chelsea Flower Show in 1997. Since then, it has exhibited in the Great Pavilion at Chelsea 17 times, and has been awarded a Gold medal on each occasion.

50 years of Chelsea for Richard Barnard



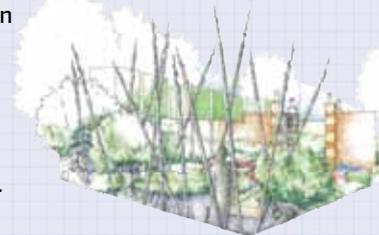
Managing Director of Hillier Landscapes, Richard has been involved with the show for 50 continuous years – at first in the construction of show gardens, and for about the last 25 years as a judge. He was awarded the RHS Associate of Honour in 2011.

150 years of Rudyard Kipling

In the Great Pavilion, the 150th anniversary of Rudyard Kipling's birth will be celebrated by a combined display from Pennard Plants and Roots and Shoots, based on his horticultural poem *The Glory of the Garden*.

200 years on from the Battle of Waterloo

Wellington College's 'The Living Legacy Garden', designed by Andrew Wilson and Gavin McWilliam, will depict the 200-year anniversary of the Battle of Waterloo. Wilson McWilliam Studio's 2014 Show Garden was awarded a Silver-Gilt medal.



Birmingham Cathedral is 300

Birmingham City Council's floral representation of the cathedral's tower will sit among the bells of cascading flowers in the Great Pavilion.

800 years of the Magna Carta

Celebrating the sealing of the Magna Carta in 1215, the 'Runnymede Surrey Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Garden' (by A Touch of France Garden Design) will have a formal medieval planting theme.

RHS Chelsea Flower Show, London

19–23 May, 8am–8pm (Saturday 23 May, 8am–5:30pm; sell off from 4pm). ♦ Visit www.rhs.org.uk/chelsea for more and to book tickets, or call: **0844 338 7539**.