

Urban gardener Cleve West

Velvet goldmine



**CHELSEA
GOLD
MEDAL
WINNER**

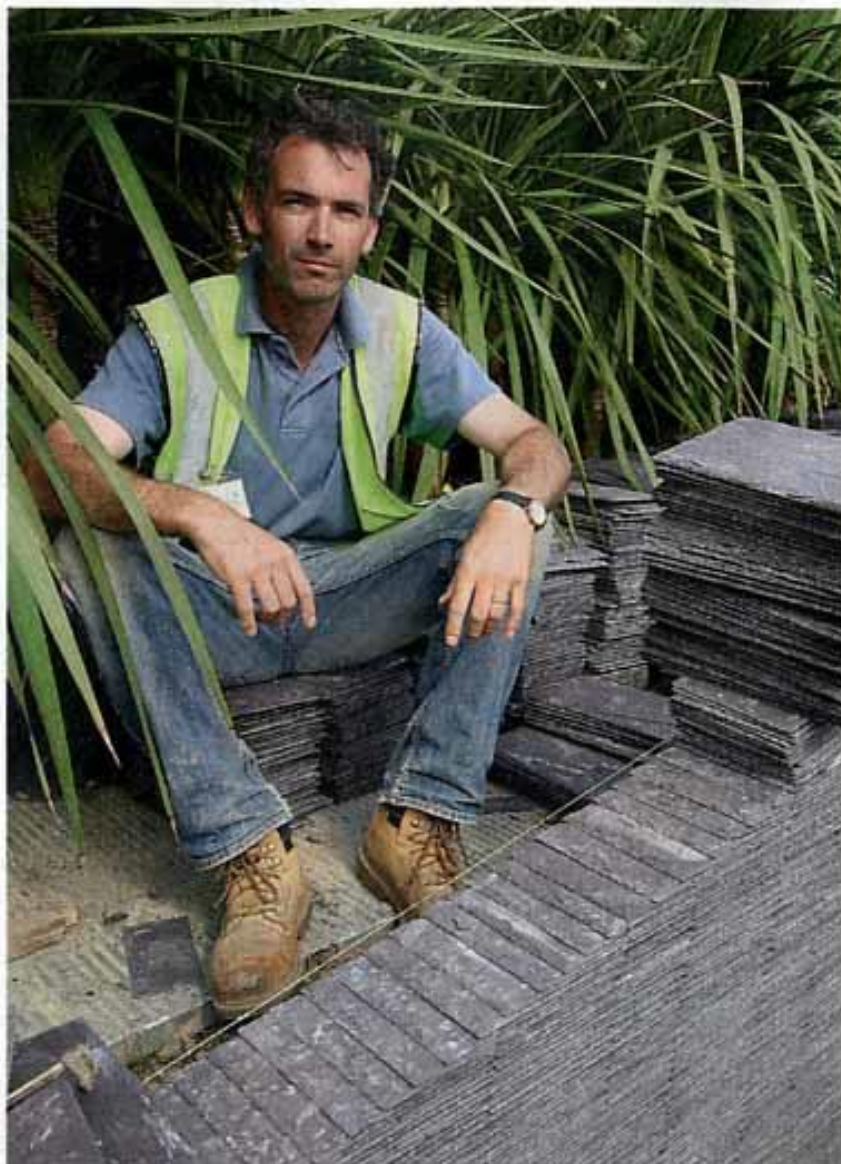
Gardening hacks have voiced some concern about the fact that there will be only 13 large gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show this year (compared to the usual 20-odd). Yet, perhaps inspired by the best display

of spring blossom we've seen for years, a pared-down Chelsea is now being embraced for what should be a catalyst for new faces to make their mark.

Luciano Giubbilei may not be a "new face" in the world of garden design but his first show garden at Chelsea is eagerly anticipated; Witan Investments Trust will be backing Nick Dexter and his design for a contemporary sanctuary; Thomas Hoblyn, who struck Gold with a courtyard garden at last year's Chelsea is designing a bigger exhibit inspired by a contemporary wetland; *Top Gear* presenter, James May, will be creating a courtyard garden out of Plasticine (yes, Plasticine) and Tony Smith debuts his first show garden at Chelsea for paper-tissue manufacturer, Quilted Velvet.

It's curious to note that in the midst of a recession, the one product that is selling quite well at the moment is toilet paper. It stands to reason really, what with the nation's bowels so jittery. Smith – who managed to secrete his conceptual garden, "More Questions than Answers", into Chelsea last year and then go on to win his second Gold Medal and Best in Show award in succession at Hampton Court with "Ecstasy in a Very Black Box" – has his work cut out building no less than three show gardens (Chelsea, Hampton Court and Tatton Park) for Quilted Velvet. You could say he's on a roll. Sorry.

Chelsea is not generally known for its forays into the world of conceptual gardening, so just before Smith embarked on his horticultural triathlon I asked him whether he'd made a conscious effort to make it more like a garden so as not to upset the regulars. "It's a bit of both really," he said. But surely the sheer fact that he's using some 55 square metres of pink ("with a touch of purple") Busy Lizzies, a plant often derided by the horticultural style-police and seen as a hallmark of naffness, suggests that this is going to be more conceptual? If not, then what on earth possessed him? Smith explained that the garden is based on a daydream he had on a long car-ride home after getting the brief from Quilted Velvet. It showed a comfortable seating space cut into a bank of slate surrounded by a sea of pink ("with a touch of purple") Busy Lizzies and a chaotic hedge of *Cordyline australis*. An arrangement of four cypresses would reflect the sponsor's commitment to planting three trees for every



Tony Smith is exhibiting his first show garden – which features a sea of pink Busy Lizzies – at Chelsea this year

one it uses. "The cordyline, with all its variables and awkward shapes acts as a metaphor for the world," explains Smith, "while the Busy Lizzies seemed like an appropriate foil for the potentially oppressive slate."

The garden is bound to divide opinion, but this is the least of Smith's concerns. "You have to be fatalistic about it," he said. "I responded to the brief from a personal perspective. After that it's beyond my control so there's no point in worrying about it." Still, I couldn't resist pressing him on whether he'd at any point had second thoughts about the pink (with a touch of purple) Busy Lizzies? He was amazingly resolute. "I suppose a flower show is a box where we feel safe and think we know what to expect. My aim is to escape and explore." With pink (with a touch of purple) Busy Lizzies? "Of course I've wondered what people might think, but I like to remain loyal to my initial response to the brief. So you see I have no choice; I can't ruin the dream."

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