

October 2026 meeting – “Behind the Scenes at the Chelsea Flower Show” by Mark Richardson

Our October meeting kicked off with the AGM, reflecting on a busy and successful year for the Society. Following the AGM our speaker was Mark Richardson from Stewart Landscape Construction. Mark's talk, titled “Behind the scenes at the Chelsea Flower Show”, gave us some fascinating insights into what is really involved in the design, planning and construction of the fabulous gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show.

The planning, design and procurement processes starts about 18 months before the show, but Mark explained that the contractors only have 19 days on-site to build the gardens and turn bare earth into fabulous show gardens. Generally, the plants arrive 6 days before the Show, and Mark likes to have completed all of the planting 3 days before the show, giving the garden time to settle. A relocation plan for the garden after the Show has finished is now an important factor and is taken into consideration by the Show judges.

Of course, things do go wrong occasionally, and Mark told us about a trade stand display they were working on at Hampton Court Flower Show which included fresh vegetables. Unfortunately, rabbits turned up overnight and ate the vegetables! On another occasion, there had been a trip to a quarry in Yorkshire to select some specific large boulders for a Chelsea show garden. When the lorry went back to collect the boulders to take them to Chelsea, it turned out that they had inadvertently been put through the crusher!

Mark said that he loved the challenge of building the gardens and working with his highly skilled landscaping and construction team, but he did admit that building 4 gardens for the 2024 Chelsea Flower Show was stressful, and perhaps too many! However, it is worth noting that two of Mark's gardens in 2024 were the St James's Piccadilly: Imagine the World Garden which won a Gold Medal in the Show Garden class, and The Bridgerton Garden, which won a Silver Medal in the Sanctuary Garden class. The cost of building a Show Garden can be around £500,000 with the smaller gardens costing about £100,000 to £120,000.

Mark's beautifully illustrated talk gave us a fascinating insight into what is required to produce an award-winning garden for the Chelsea Flower Show.