

PLAYING IN THE GARDEN

The International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire is famous for testing the boundaries of garden design and this year is no exception.

Benedict Vanheems went to take a look. Photography by **Charles Hawes**



After completing the UK flower show circuit, a visit to the International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire is like diving into an icy plunge pool following a sauna session — it invigorates and leaves you a little breathless. It's a smack in the face and a welcome wake-up call to the starch-collared affairs across the Channel.

The festival is in its 15th consecutive year and has become a firm fixture in the world of garden design. Where traditional show gardens do the 'pretty' bit successfully, Chaumont allows participants to cut loose and escape the conventional. The theme for 2006 is 'playing in the garden', a title that fits for both the visitors enjoying the interactive gardens and the garden designers indulging in some seriously creative fun in their designers' playground. More than ever, this theme invites engagement, and in this respect the show is a resounding success.

As this was my first visit to the festival I had few preconceptions but immediately found that the contrast to RHS Chelsea and Hampton Court Palace Flower Shows couldn't be more stark. Each show garden is contained within a girdle of tall hornbeam hedges and is of exactly the same shape and size, which means that they are all born from the same starting point. It is up to the designers to forge the individual personalities that make the festival such a sensory experience.

No matter how different each garden may be, they are all unified by the masterly concept of Belgian landscape designer Jacques Wirtz, who laid out the festival to represent a cross section of a poplar tree: from the central space (the trunk) radiate

the paths (branches) with each garden forming a leaf. Out of so many seemingly disparate parts comes togetherness — a perfect analogy for the international make-up of Chaumont. Designers come from across Europe and the Americas, but sadly there are no representatives from the UK this year. With four of the 30 plots vacant, it seems like a lost opportunity for home-grown talent to share their skills with the international community.

Interaction

The play theme is immediately obvious on entering the show garden space, with shrieks of laughter spilling out from behind the hedges and contented faces darting between plots. Some of the gardens take the theme more literally than others, requiring human interaction to complete the picture. 'Flower 'n' roll' (by Philippe and Grégoire Dutertre and Arnaud Delacroix) is a triumph. Here, brightly-coloured balls, two metres in diameter, are rolled along alleys of black lava rock in-between beds of restrained monochrome plantings of yew, ivy and bay, and alchemilla, Jacob's ladder, lysimachia and lamium, all protected from annihilation by elegant black metal railings. The scale of the game ensures that taking part is a must and it was interesting to note that every age group was getting involved — I watched two ladies in their eighties pummeling the balls back and forth for a good ten minutes. Similarly, 'Spin away' (Anne-Marie Arbefeuille, Eliane Cumet and Gérard Pontet) combines the excitement of the spinning top with bright swirls of annuals, heuchera and grasses to create a space with children in mind, who swarmed to the garden like ants to honey. Garish roundabout disks, the majority topped with wisps of stipa, invite children to spin. There is no pretence here, just pure fun.

One of the most promising plots, 'A chessboard for Alice, a mobile landscape' (Benjamin Jacquemet and Carolyn Wittendal) was frustratingly cordoned off. In this space, metal wheelie bins planted up in red and white form the chess pieces, which negotiate a chequered floor. Two tall refere



chairs allow the players to direct their minions to move the chess pieces accordingly. Maybe the bins toppled when dragged, but it would have been a success if only it remained accessible. This is a problem in a few of the plots; 'The 'Play Aria'', for example, was closed off — possibly due to its precariously teetering hessian sack walls that looked, to my eye, liable to collapse.

There is a healthy recycling mentality at the show, which must save a great deal of time and expense each spring when the gardens are constructed. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the two main pool gardens, alive with the trill of amphibian life. 'The Venus Game, a game of chance' has cleverly adapted the pool from the previous year's garden into a giant drifting puzzle. The pieces represent Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus', and only chance will bring them together. However, two things will prevent the puzzle from ever being complete: the fact that pieces are missing, and the encroaching plant material within the pond, which adds a mild sense of anxiety. Evenly spaced pots of iris, bulrush and pontederia give the pool a feeling of a swamp, although the brightly coloured puzzle pieces add a pleasing counterpoint to the tapestry of aquatics.

Theatricality

Designed gardens can be theatre, a platform for the plants or garden user contained within. 'Play... As you like it' (Céline Dodelin, Matthieu Lanher and François Wattellier) takes this idea and translates it into three progressively smaller stage sets that give a tunnel effect when viewed head-on. A solitary

Opposite: Children play in the primary-coloured 'Spin away' garden.

Above: Oversized bowling balls give 'Flower 'n' roll' its interactive edge.

Below left: Steel rods clamped together form a springy path through meadow annuals in 'Role-play in the prairie'.

Below: In 'Hide-and-peek in the shadows' the garden culminates in a tree of mirrors underplanted with *Cyanara cardunculus*.





Top: 'A chessboard for Alice, a mobile landscape' is based on a garden-sized game of chess. Above left: 'The shadow of translucent concrete' uses two solitary *Phyllostachys aurea* as the sole planting. Above right: 'Play...As you like it' takes garden theatricality to the extreme.

Opposite: 'The Venus Game, a game of chance' contrasts bright floating puzzle pieces with stands of deep-green aquatic foliage.

birch breaks up the view, making it the unavoidable centre of attention — a potent technique that's highly effective. Confusion and surrealism are explored in 'Hide-and-seek in the shadows' (Laurence Kaisergruber, Christine Alban and Sarah Leterrier) where cloud-like trees cut from treated MDF and glass, surrounded by a wall of mirrors, serve to disorientate. Kales, climbing vegetables and perennials sprout from the woodchip floor, creating an unsettling landscape.

Minimalism is taken to the extreme in a few of the gardens, with just a passing nod towards the playtime brief. 'The shadow of translucent concrete' (Bill Price and Peter Jay Zweig) is such a space. Nevertheless, it's an ultra-sexy garden. From the path there appears just a wall of concrete, but venture into the garden and the plot unfolds. The concrete wall is a narrow pavilion, gracefully overhanging a short flight of steps into the bulk of the garden. Inside the pavilion can be admired tiny translucent tubes embedded to create a constellation of tiny stars. The rest of the garden is laid to gravel, with just two *Phyllostachys aurea* and two concrete armchairs to relieve the austerity. It's so simple and a throwback to fifties modernism. I found myself lingering in this calm space.

Rivers of planting

While each garden is an island unto itself, there is a degree of unity bestowed by the rivers of planting that wind their way about the festival grounds and between the gardens. These offer some stunning planting ideas, ranging from gravel plantings to a colourful river of annuals. What many of the festival gardens lack in planting prowess, these areas more than make up for, providing a basket of ideas ripe for pillage.

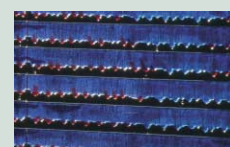
One of the most reassuring elements of the festival is the unequivocal air of cooperation. Not one garden is designed by a sole designer, which considering their relatively modest size is worth noting. Whether or not this is deliberate, it gives a great sense of community to the whole affair — *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, if you will. This is bolstered further by the on-site gardeners who take care of the gardens throughout the season, tending them and replacing faded planting when appropriate. It means there are many hands at play as the gardens evolve. It is one of the most attractive traits of Chaumont and one that sets it apart.

Takeaway design bites

There are ample ideas at Chaumont that could be adapted for a real-life garden design project.



Squares of timber lock together to create a wavy bench in 'Synaesthesia' by Italians Francesca and Annacaterina Piras.



Water drips from the blue glass slats that make up a stunning fountain sculpture by German designer Herbert Dreiseitl in the permanent ornamental pool 'The great fractal pool'.

Rammed earth, capped by a thin layer of naturally-coloured cement, forms the walls and planters in 'One, two, three...four' by Ludovic Smagghie, Nicolas Menu and the Mooslin collective.



This spiral staircase is made from suspended sheets of timber cut to shape and spaced about six inches apart. Children can climb inside the structure, which is the focal point to Pascale and Christian Pottgiesser's garden 'The cat burglar'.







Above: 'Hide-and-seek in the shadows' creates a confusing landscape through its tree silhouettes and mirrors.

The pioneering spirit of Chaumont is making a return to our shores with the revival of the International Festival of the Garden for 2007 and the introduction of the new conceptual gardens category at RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show (see event reports, page 40). It proves there's an appetite for gardens that challenge traditional design tenets. Judging by the success of Chaumont and the number of Brits in attendance, it's a process that will see every last crumb of inspiration devoured by a voracious public as the movement gains pace in this country. Meanwhile, those hungry for something until recently missing from the UK menu, would do well to pay a visit to Chaumont, which runs until 15 October.

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A different take

Garden designer Julia Fogg gives her take on the festival gardens.

The impression of the 'Misty Valley' experienced on entry to the festival site never fails to excite with its aura of magic and mystery. This permanent garden is, however, the most perfect introduction to this year's play theme. Visitors of all ages marvel at this wonderland.

This quality of magic reappears in the most successful gardens, all of which have a sense of the hidden and the revealed. For example, 'A word maze' uses curves and angles with well-placed misty mirrors, metal and blocks of metallic planting to underline the pathwork of Ariadne's thread. 'Synaesthesia' invites the visitor to respond as the journey unfolded through curtains, both soft and resonant, past strong and aromatic planting buzzing with insects. As innovative and hugely entertaining, is the sorcerer's apprentice kitchen garden 'GMO fun' that poses comical opinions on the serious topic of genetically modified organisms.

Some designers try to evoke childhood memories of play and gardens but generally these are less successful and fairly uninteresting. A miniature collection of objets trouvés among a mass planting of gaura attracted little attention ('Let's play garden'). Other designers try to play with scale, which is successfully handled in 'Did you say pig or fig?', inspired by Alice in Wonderland — Alice is a recurring character — but less resolved in the 'Flower 'n' roll' garden, where oversized bouncing balls overwhelm the circulation and flatten the smallest visitors! The planting here appears inconsequential. Combining an active play area and a sense of garden within such small, contained sites is a real challenge. One garden, 'Spin away', shines out using brilliant, complimentary colours of sky and sun as its unifying element. Giant topsy-turvy pogo sticks hold spinning grasses. It is fun and full of joy.

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Featured designers

Garden designers from around the globe are taking part in this year's festival.

Maria-Josefina Casares, Maria Noel, Martina Barzi, Tomas Camps and Damian Ayarza (Argentina): **'A word maze'**
Bill Price and Peter Jay Zweig (USA):

'The shadow of translucent concrete'

Yves Rolina and Adélaïde Fiche with Prof. Louis-Michel Nourry (France): **'I'm not afraid are you?'**

Céline Dodelin, Matthieu Lanher and François Wattellier (France): **'Play... As you like it'**

Alice Roussille, Valérie Crouslé, Laurence Garfield and Alexandra Torossian (France): **'Did you say pig or fig?'**

Laurence Kaisergruber, Christine Alban and Sarah Letierrier (France): **'Hide-and-seek in the shadows'**

Stefano Bonadonna, Marie-Sabine Gouriou, Virginie Ort and Luc Richard (France): **'Role-play in the prairie'**

Pascale and Cristian Pottgiesser (France): **'The cat burglar'**
Philippe and Grégoire Dutertre and Arnaud Delacroix (France):

'Flower 'n' roll'

Ludovic Smagghe, Nicolas Menu and the Mooslin collective (France): **'One, two, three... four?'**

Giardino Sonoro and nEmoGruppo architects (Italy):

'The 'Play Aria''

Agnès Mory, Yves Magnier and Thierry Saclier D'Arquian (Belgium): **'Let's play garden'**

Benjamin Clarens, Marc Rihouey and Yann Martin with Professor David Elalouf (France): **'My secret hideaway'**

Philippe and Robert Hamm (France): **'GMO fun'**
Stéphanie Trema and Guylaine Garcia (France):

'Garden of the Chromis'

Elodie Nourrigat and Jacques Brion (France):

'Bamboo song'

Anne-Marie Arbefeulle, Eliane Cumet and Gérard Pontet (France): **'Spin away!'**

Déborah Bocquet and Léonard Cattoni (France):

'Heads or tails'

Dimitri Xenakis and Maro Avrabou (France):

'The Venus Game, a game of chance'

Jérôme and Christian Houadec (France) and Maria Mikulasova (Slovakia): **'Imaginoir'**

Ludovic Biaunier and Rodolphe Chemière (France):

'Snakes and ladders'

Caroline Perrin and Marine Duvivier (France):

'The sweet folly of the Villa Conchiglia'

Francesco Riaccardo Ghio, Federica Benelli, Vincenzo Di Siena and Stefania Lorenzini (Italy): **'Swings'**

Benjamin Jacquemet and Carolyn Wittendal (France):

'A chessboard for Alice, a mobile landscape'

Francesca and Annacaterina Piras (Italy): **'Synaesthesia'**
Pierre Luu and Christian Qui (France): **'Water hopscotch'**

For further information, garden planting lists and full details of the designers' creative briefs, please visit the Chaumont website: www.chaumont-jardins.com