

County's Show of strength

The 2015 RHS Chelsea Flower show takes place from 19-23 May and, once again, Devon will have a strong representation. Here, in a special feature for *Devon Life*, KATHRYN AALTO profiles eleven of the county's finest who will be at the show

This is the second year I've been asked to write about Devonians at the Chelsea Flower Show for *Devon Life*. It is remarkable how the spirit and soil of Devon infuses the livelihoods of these artisans and growers.

What they do is grounded in place, and should be celebrated. From the wool of Dartmoor Whiteface sheep to the angle of the sun-growing plants to soil used in clay pots, their work here has a real sense of place. Let's wish them well at Chelsea this year.

Adrian Gray, stonebalancing

In the East Devon village of Northleigh, about three miles west of Colyton, lives the artist Adrian Gray.

Adrian creates illusory sculptures from naturally weathered rocks and stones that balance with an improbable composition. It is called stonebalancing. The stone's state of equilibrium creates startling natural beauty.

Adrian says: "For me it's the simplicity of my work that makes it magical, and on making this discovery I also found a perseverance to achieve one aim - to create art that inspires a sense of wonder."

Balancing the sculptures is performance art in a very pure form, he adds. "The very process of balancing the stones has been called many things, some contradictory: calming, tense, therapeutic, mesmerising, beautiful, puzzling and even spiritual," he writes.

"It has a meditative quality, it forces you to ignore the continual chattering in your head and absorb yourself in the process of the balance. You 'listen' with your fingers, your focus targeted and complete. Fundamentally, you find the stillness inside yourself and become one with the stones."

Adrian works along the South Devon



After collecting and balancing the stones, Adrian Gray photographs them in their natural locations

coastline. After collecting and balancing the stones, he photographs them in their natural locations.

At the Chelsea Flower Show, Adrian will be giving demonstrations of how he works. In the past 14 years his work has evolved to include new ideas and themes, but the predominant feature remains the beauty and seemingly impossible nature of balance.

"My stonebalancing art is well known in Dorset and Devon and since appearing on *Grand Designs* and various other TV shows,

my garden sculptures are proving to be very popular.

"At this year's Chelsea Flower Show, I will have a large garden stand with a coastal theme. Sidmouth Garden Centre is doing the planting for me. As well as my sculptures I am having a book published called *The Art of Stonebalancing*. It will be launched at the show."

The Show is also exciting on new levels because he will be unveiling a new type of sculpture he has been working on for the past year. stonebalancing.com

Whetman Pinks

Established in 1936, award-winning Whetman Pinks in Dawlish will be launching a spectacular new range of Pinks, or Dianthus, at the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show. Called “Whetman Cocktails,” the flowers will be on display with other plants, at the show as well as promoting the beauty of Pinks as a cut flower.

Managing director Carolyn Bourne explains there is a common misunderstanding of Pinks and modern day spray carnations as cut flowers. “Pinks used to be known as the poor man’s carnation. Today, carnations are the poor man’s Pink! Whetman is winding the clock back 25 years and growing Pinks for cut flowers again.”

At this year’s Show, Whetman Pinks hopes to wow visitors with an amazing display of Pinks as cut flowers, designed by one of the country’s foremost floral artists. The company is proud to promote Devon-bred and Devon-grown Pinks. Many varieties in their brochure were bred during the 1970s and ’80s by Cecil Wyatt from

Bovey Tracey with names such as Haytor, Widecombe Fair and Cranmere Pool. Many of the varieties bred by Whetman are prefixed Devon, such as Devon Wizard, Devon Cream and Devon Pearl.

When last at Chelsea in 2012, Whetman Pinks won a Gold Medal for their exhibit entitled “In Remembrance of Things Past.” Their introduction, Dianthus ‘Memories’ - “a gorgeous white intensely fragrant pink” exudes Carolyn - was presented to Angela Rippon, “a Devonshire lass!”, who received the plant in her capacity as an ambassador for the Alzheimer’s Society.

Whetman Pinks pledged the royalties on sales of ‘Memories’ to the Alzheimer’s Society and together with the efforts of colleagues in the industry, donated over £25,000 to the charity. The plant was also the second prize winner in the Chelsea Flower Show ‘Plant of the Year’ Competition and won an industry award for Best New Plant Introduction 2013 - so it has an impressive track record so far!”
whetmanpinks.com



Pollyfields

Magical and sweet, festive and fragrant are words that come to mind at the name “Pollyfields.” A family-run business in Torrington, North Devon, Pollyfields creates and designs a range of home fragrances, pot pourri, garlands and other interior dried botanical furnishings. Everything is hand made by the Pollyfields team, led by Fiona Jackson and her designers.

Started as a cottage industry in 2000, Fiona has literally moved into a beautiful farmhouse where she and her full-time staff create items for the consumer market as well as trade.

Pollyfields specialises in lavender and rose creations including sweet organza bags, hearts, letters, bouquets, pomanders and potpourri. They make both minimalist and luxurious one-of-a-kind wreaths, fruit garlands, strings, circles, hearts and potpourri. There are beautiful overflowing candle centrepieces made of



Pollyfields creates and designs a range of home fragrances, pot pourri, garlands and other interior dried botanical furnishings

hops and roses, roses and lavender and rose and larkspur and many more hard-to-find botanical creations.

Their products can be found at shops such as Fortnum & Mason, The Eden Project, Fenwicks, Kew Gardens, Van Hage Garden Centre and many other bespoke places. Pollyfields originated with

preparing and designing furnishing at the home or venue of clients, be it a large family occasion such as a wedding or a business party and this remains a part of their botanical business. Confetti, favours, hearts and centrepieces form a core of the wedding products.
pollyfields.co.uk

Bowdens

Located in Dartmoor National Park, Bowdens Hostas is more than a specialist nursery. While they focus on four plant families - hostas, ferns, bamboo and grasses - at their Sticklepath nursery near Okehampton, they also have a special knack for cultivating RHS Gold Medals.

Their team of experts have collectively earned 125 RHS Gold Medals for show displays, including 26 Gold Medals at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show - truly a gold standard enterprise.

A family-run business owned by Tim and Rose Penrose, the Bowdens team includes a range of experts: Dick Hayward brings them the rarest of ferns able to survive a UK climate. Paul Whittaker is the author of two books on bamboo and is a legend in plants with 50 RHS Gold Medals to his name. Martin Richard is the Tree Ferns Holder of The Veitch Memorial Medal, and greatly admired in fern circles. Mike Shadrack is a leading US hosta aficionado.
bowdenschostas.com



Photo by Matt Austin

Award-winning Whetman Pinks will be launching a spectacular new range of pinks at the 2015 Chelsea Flower Show

Plant Belles

Five miles west of Crediton in the mid-Devon hamlet of Penstone, a former jewellery maker and silversmith now bends and twists metal on a grander scale. Jenny Maddock is the owner of Plant Belles, a family business founded in 2008 handcrafting elegant 'grow-thru' plant supports and wirework for the garden. This is her second visit to the Show.

Functional and ornamental, Plant Belles are solid steel wire with a natural rust finish, designed and made in Devon by Jenny and her husband Alex. From plant hoops and hurdles to edgings to arches, her products protect spring shoots and provide

support to plants through the growing season. Trained at the Royal College of Art in jewellery, Jenny greatly enjoys the challenges of garden shows, especially Chelsea. Last year they won a three-star award for their trade stand. "Shows are a great way to test new ideas out, to gather feedback. Chelsea is a great opportunity to launch new designs," she says.

Inspired by the Arts and Crafts period, the Plant Belles can be seen in the iconic garden of that time period, Hidcote Manor. Plant Belles have been working with the National Trust since 2008, co-designing the majestic 'George' Belle with the then Head Gardener at Castle Drogo, Andrew Midgley. plantbelles.co.uk



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Paul Vanstone at Combe Sculpture Garden

Since 2009, the two-acre Coombe Sculpture Garden opens for the month of June in the West Devon hamlet of Bradstone. An anticipated Devon summer event, people can visit the beautiful gardens, surrounding a 17th-century listed building, where the work of celebrated sculptor Paul Vanstone is exhibited.

The artist has an international reputation and has won many awards for the originality and elegance of his work. His sculptures exhibited at the Coombe Garden show how they can fit into gardens of all sizes, from city gardens to a parkland setting.

"For the past five years we have exhibited at Chelsea," Paul Vanstone explains. "We have won awards for three of those years and in 2014 this was the highest award given to a trade stand, the five star award."

Paul studied sculpture at Central St Martin's School of Art before completing an MFA in sculpture at the Royal College of Art. Following his graduation he worked in Italy at the traditional marble carving studios near the famous Carrera quarries. He also spent time working in Berlin and has travelled to Rajasthan.

On his return to the UK, and for the next five years, Vanstone became an assistant to leading British sculptor, Anish Kapoor. Consequently, works carved by Vanstone on Kapoor's behalf have been exhibited at world leading galleries, including the Tate Modern, London. coombesculpturegarden.com; paulvanstone.co.uk.

Twool

All the Devon artists and horticulturalists heading to the Chelsea Flower Show in 2015 have a genius loci about their work: their Devon-grown, Devon-created plants and art have a prevailing spirit of this place.

And this is especially true with Kim Stead's Twool, a Dartmoor wool twine. Sustainable and strong, twine to a gardener is like salt and pepper to a cook. Twool is a British wool alternative to imported jute twine and the necessary condiment to the gardener. And the material used to create it has deep Devon roots as it comes from the rare breed of Whiteface Dartmoor sheep.

Whiteface Dartmoor wool has a long staple length, making it ideal - strong and durable - for spinning worsted yarn. At the same time, the wool also makes the twine and rope soft and pliable. Kim works closely with a Devon-based textile designer and manufacturer. John Arbon, who works in a traditional method to create Twool. In addition, they use a historic dyer, spooler, rope maker and weaver to create, as Kim says "a truly British heritage product with British manufacturing and raw materials at its heart".

Twool has been a finalist for RHS Chelsea Garden Product of the Year in 2013 and 2014. Kim hopes to win this year: "We have in place a firm foundation to grow on as a small business and our hope is that Twool will be a modern day thread linking sheep and wool in a commercial marketplace, be a potential life-line for a rare breed sheep whilst re-invigorating traditional industries not just in Devon but across our country." twool.co.uk



Photo by Steven Hayward

Kim Stead's Twool product has been a finalist for RHS Chelsea Garden Product of the Year in 2013 and 2014



Philip Simmons says the weather and natural beauty where he works have an influence on him

Philip Simmons Sculptural Ceramics

In the low-key rural Blackdown Hills parish of Clayhidon, Philip Simmonds enjoys the daily treat of Devon skies: from pewtery, grey and moody clouds to vivid blue. The weather and natural beauty of the AONB have an influence, he says, on his claywork.

Simmonds is a designer-maker of large scale sculptural pots. Missing only two years, he has exhibited at the Chelsea Flower Show since 2001 and returns again this month. His clients are mainly garden designers and private clients.

"My work could be described as classic design with a contemporary twist, and my influences include architecture, landscape, and the wonderful colours of our

changeable English weather," reveals Philip. "There aren't many people making such large ceramics for gardens, so it's relatively unusual.

"We know The Chelsea Flower Show well, and in exhibitor terms we're old hands! We design and build a large stand, and have won numerous awards for Outstanding Presentation. It's always an exciting and dynamic mix of creativity, originality, excitement and sheer hard work.

"There's nothing else like it for meeting and doing business with the highest level of clients, and we mix with a fascinating array of people from all over the world. I am currently working on pieces in the studio which will be launched at the show this year."

philipssimmonds.co.uk

Tale Valley Nursery

Located in the Tale Valley between Cullompton and Honiton, Tale Valley Nursery is a small traditional nursery run by husband and wife team, Chris and Lorraine Birchall.

Although the nursery is a National Collection Holder of *Rhodohypoxis* and *Rhodoxis*, their exhibit at this year's Chelsea Flower Show is a subtly beautiful display of shade tolerant perennials in a woodland setting. It is their third Chelsea Flower Show. Says Chris: "It is possibly the most important show for us as we are exhibiting in support of 'Momentum'. This is a south-east based charity providing support to families with children suffering from cancer which we feel is a very worthwhile cause."

All the plants used in their exhibit, with the exception of a few specimen acers, will have been grown in their Tale Valley nursery. Chris explains what excites them about their plants and display this year: "Shade tolerant plants are often not the most colourful of plants but their subtle colours, shapes and textures provide a relaxed atmosphere and are often at their peak during the spring months which we believe makes them ideal for exhibiting at



Chris and Lorraine Birchall of Tale Valley Nursery: 'For those who enjoy the exhibiting aspect within the horticultural industry, Chelsea has to be the ultimate'

Chelsea. "These are displayed in a naturalistic setting which is to include a 'Momentum' family of four life-size willow figures.

"These figures will be located on a winding path which depicts the journey the family have to make whilst dealing with the illness of a child."

Exhibiting at the show is often the highlight of a horticulturalist's career and Chris is no exception: "For those who enjoy the exhibiting aspect within the horticultural industry, Chelsea has to be

the ultimate. It is probably the one horticultural show that has a worldwide reputation. Merely being allowed to exhibit there is an achievement, something we never envisaged we would ever actually do."

"Something we like about Chelsea and all the horticultural shows is that one is judged against a standard, it is not a competition and there is a certain camaraderie at Chelsea which is not realised at the other shows."

talevalleynursery.co.uk

Mandy Plants

Coming in vibrant colours of orange, red, pink, purple and yellow (as well as a white), the mandevilla is a tropical plant native to Central and South America. And Liz Stanton of Mandy Plants is surrounded by them every day. Mandy Plants is a specialist nursery located in Ipplepen, four miles south west of Newton Abbot.

Liz started the nursery and mail order business in South Devon four years ago when she moved with her husband's work. "It loves the kinder Devon winters, combined with higher light levels," Liz explains. "The plant itself is also a real 'Bobby Dazzler' and flowers from May to Christmas. It needs frost protection as it is a tender perennial, but a conservatory, window sill, or porch where it gets as much light as possible, works. If it gets heat it is a bonus."

In addition to mandevillas, Liz also sells



Coming in vibrant colours of orange, red, pink, purple and yellow, the mandevilla is a tropical plant native to Central and South

other varieties of plants which can be seen on her website. Although she has exhibited at other RHS shows, winning several gold medals, this the first time Mandy Plants has exhibited at Chelsea. "I look forward to bringing this species to Chelsea which I think will be the first time a specialist of mandevilla has exhibited there."

mandyplants.com

Westcountry Nurseries

Specialising in colourful vertical lupins, Westcountry Nurseries of Woolserly in North Devon is an award-winning nursery owned by Sarah Conibear. Primarily mail order, they grow their own plants in Devon not far from the coast.

In addition to their notable lupins, they sell a range of herbaceous perennials, alpines, ferns, grasses, bulbs, climbers and more. Westcountry lupins are also growing in the gardens of Highgrove, HRH The Prince of Wales' estate in Gloucestershire. The nursery has been featured on Gardeners' World Live in 2008, 2012 and 2013.

westcountrynurseries.co.uk



Kathryn Aalto is an American landscape designer, historian, writer and teacher. Her book *Exploring the Hundred Acre Wood: The Natural World of Winnie-the-Pooh* (Timber Press 2015) is available on amazon.com. She can be reached at kathrynaalto@hotmail.com. Twitter: @kathrynaalto