BBC Gardeners' World 2024 Spring Fair, Beaulieu

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Kim Henson reports from the green(fingered) fields of the National Motor Museum, Beaulieu…

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This year's popular Gardeners' World Spring Fair has returned to Beaulieu (as in 2023) and the show, which ran from 3rd to 5th May 2024, featured a fresh layout and a wide variety of new features.

Now of course Beaulieu is famous for its superb National Motor Museum, and this is a

motoring magazine website, but many of our Wheels-Alive readers are gardening enthusiasts or beginners (usually in search of ideas), as well as being interested in motor cars. Many enjoy being in a garden as much as sat behind a steering wheel, and this busy show provided nature-related colour, light and inspiration galore for everyone – and in my case at the end of a pleasant drive to Beaulieu in the heart of the New Forest… Much to my delight I also found plenty of 'wheels' to enjoy there, in addition to the gardening aspects to savour.

On arrival at the site, visitors were directed to park their cars in the large hilltop parking area, with a downhill walk of about 10 minutes to the display area. I was impressed by the provision of a mini-bus shuttle service between the two, also the thoughtful siting of some portable loos about halfway down the pathway, for those walkers in need…

I explored the show at a leisurely pace, taking all day to meander happily around the exhibits and stalls. Fortunately on the day I visited (Friday 3rd May) the weather was dry, with increasing amounts of sunshine through the day; perfect for my journey of exploration around the show.

What follows is my own story of my day at the Spring Fair…

Close to the entrance to the showground was a magnificent display of classic Land Rovers, horse transporter lorries and tractors, including exhibits from the New Forest Tractor and Engine Club, and with some fascinating stationary engines in operation too. I spent some time here, and am always amazed by the dedication and attention to detail of the owners in restoring such vehicles and machines, and keeping them in fantastic running condition.

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At an early stage of my tour I made for The Hillier Experience, a calming centrepiece woodland-themed show garden. This included an array of shade-friendly planting, flowers and bulbs, with inspirational plant information provided throughout.



This year the Hillier team has placed more emphasis on woodland and naturalistic planting and cultivated areas. They showcased a traditional woodland with many natural plants, such as Cornus, Hellebores, Ferns and Foxgloves – offering gardeners food for thought to create their own pockets of woodland at home.





Emphasising the importance of trees in our world, the show garden was shaded by a canopy of semi-mature trees, surrounded by natural plants and subtle areas of colour.

I thought that the display was brilliantly thought out and executed, and chatting with some of the enthusiastic Hillier staff it was clear just how much time and effort had been put into the project. As with many of the gardens on display, this one was mounted above ground level, with neat wood ‘walls’ helping to raise and highlight the exhibit. Of course this approach can be adopted at home too, also making it easier to build, access and tend to the garden, once complete.

The Hillier Experience display area incorporated 1:1 advice ‘pods’, and a floral retail area, which was busy with buyers throughout the day (as indeed were the many retail outlets selling plants and garden-related items).

Plant sessions were on offer from Charles Carr on the BBC Gardeners’ World stage, and there was a new plant launch on display.

Individual Show Gardens…

At these events I enjoy looking closely at the individual show gardens, put together by a wide variety of individuals and organisations, and in every case taking much time and effort to conceive, build and perfect. The following round-up, from my own observations during my visit, and in no particular order, is not exhaustive but I hope gives a flavour of the variety of garden displays on show…

‘The Kettle’s On’



Designed by Tiffany Passmore and Catherine Butcher (from Plants For Design and Tiffany Passmore Border Design), this garden was intended to be a warming story of bringing together family, friends and nature – all thriving, all enjoying, all exploring.

Look carefully and you will see a robin atop the kettle… amidst a swirling trial, secret paths, a carpet of flowers and a little pond, plus the cosy campfire, a herb trug and some fruit trees. The border incorporated a mixture of edible fruit trees and bushes, herbs and seasonal flowers.

The designers say that it was created… “to highlight the importance of community,

including plants, wildlife and people, and how by working together we can create a truly beautiful and sustainable garden space”.

‘Equilibrium’





The substantial and thought-provoking ‘Equilibrium’ garden was one of the ‘College Gardens’ at the show, and was created by the Surrey-based Merrist Wood College, part of Activate Learning. It is said to draw from the College’s agricultural and horticultural roots, to form a garden reflecting its heritage.

The stated aim of this garden is to address climate change, nurture wildlife and experiment with resilient planting. It showcases diverse plants and promotes biodiversity by using resilient plants and repurposed materials, where possible.

Essentially it encourages people to think about their garden design choices, and questions

the concept of equilibrium in a changing environment.

The shelter within this garden was crafted from repurposed corrugated metal sheets from an old agricultural grain store, and within its sides hosts bug hotels made from timber from the College campus, to help visiting insects. In addition its green roof collects rainwater, creating extra habitats. In turn the water is conserved in a repurposed animal trough, benefiting plants.

Further features include an old farmyard pig feeder, a repurposed wheelbarrow (serving as a water feature) and crushed concrete rescued from landfill – this was used to line the pathways.

‘Grandfather’s Garden – A trip down memory lane’


Please don't sit
on the border



Designed by David Long (David Long Garden Design), this clever display is said by David to be a scaled down recreation of the garden he spent a lot of time in and where he has his earliest garden memories.

He continues, “It was a modest space but one bursting with flowers, vegetables, and character. The cottage and its garden were a hive of activity both with wildlife and people. To me it was such a fun and interesting place to spend time”.

In conclusion he adds, “This is my first exhibit so it seemed only fitting it should be centred around a garden which inspired me, and that I loved as a child.”

Personally I found this garden very moving as it reminded me of my own grandfather's country garden in Wiltshire, also filled with wonderful blooms, vegetables, fruit and wildlife, and which, as a keen gardener (as well as a 'car' man, like me!), he loved to show me, and talk to me about, when I visited as a lad; happy times shared!

'In The Pink'



Corinne Frost designed this garden and said of it, "This wrap-around border a space for me. I don't own a garden, so as a designer, most of my creativity hoes into creating spaces for the delight of other people.

‘In The Pink’ is the garden I’d choose if I could. I’ve selected only the forms and the colours that please me the most. A pink palette of spring perennials weave through the structure of the round, repeating structure of topiary mounds, with a soft accent of spring grasses. Two small garden trees watch over a small seating area, casting dappled shade over a space made for conversation.”

‘The Inner Dancer’



Designed by Matt le Gassick, of Inbud, this garden was set out within a variety of native flora, and was said to explore the narrative, ethos and very nature of the work undertaken at Bugle House. This unique facility caters for the most vulnerable young individuals with

varying needs, coupled with adverse childhood traumas.

Their ethos is to overcome the difficulties and pursue a gift they can bring to the world, helping them to find their ‘Inner Dancer’.

This garden was laid out in a radial format, incorporating a labyrinth with a series of interlinking paths, communal spaces and secluded pockets, providing a meaningful place of escape for the students of Great Oaks (in Southampton) and the wider community, and which they could use to learn, strive and thrive.

‘Sensory Recollections’ – The Queens College Garden



Designed by @Hortology, the Sensory Recollections Garden, in support of St. Margarets Hospice, was intended to take the observer back to those memories of past times spent in the garden. Through a range of sensory areas, it is said that it was designed to stimulate memories for those with dementia or ‘reaching end of life’.

A large mirror and reflecting pond provided a focal point and reflected back on the viewer, taking a journey along the paths and discovering the planting representing all of the senses and the memories that they brought back.

Two ‘memory trees’ were built into the garden, enabling visitors to place their own

memories there, with painted cobbles produced by the residents at St. Margarets Hospice (their logo is the sunflower) scattered around their bases.

‘Garden For Life’





Designed by Anne Herbert and service users for Mountbatten Hospice, this joyful garden was created for visitors to immerse themselves in the colours, scents and sounds therein.

It incorporated soft grasses, sweet peas and a trickling water fountain, plus an amazing three-dimensional sunflower.

Visitors were encouraged to sit on a bench to take a moment to allow their minds to wander, reflecting, reminiscing and celebrating the lives of loved ones – past, present and future.

This oasis is an integral part of the hospice's daily activities.

‘A New Leaf’



This border, designed by Alison Firth, BCHA (Bournemouth Churches Housing Associaton), is said to symbolise the journey of the Association’s learners, as they are encouraged and motivated to transform their lives through education.

The border features an uneven path, broken tools and unkempt planting at the start of their journey, with the winding path gradually improving and leading to inspired individuals, as they progress through the course and become eager to further their botanical and horticultural pursuits.

Other aspects of the Spring Fair:

The Get Growing Stage was an ‘edibles space’. Aimed at those wishing to carry out, and enjoy home growing, this area had special guests available, from the ‘GYO’ world, including Jason Williams (Cloud Gardener UK), Kim O’Brien, the Caley Bros and chefs from The Pig and Lime Wood hotel.

Pictured below: An ‘edibles’ border.



Daily workshops were provided in the ‘Have-A-Go’ Workshop Marquee.

The daily workshops, led by plant specialists Lucy Chamberlain, Saul Walker and Rosy Hardy (Hardy's Cottage Garden Plants) included 'Peat-Free Propagation', 'Ten Essentials of Grow Your Own', and 'Keeping Healthy Houseplants' (bookable).

Special guests for Spring on the BBC Gardeners' World Stage included Sue Kent (Saturday), Rachel de Thame (Sunday), joining the magazine editors for seasonal gardening advice – Frances Tophill (Friday) and Adam Frost (Saturday).

The Association of Professional Landscapers' Landscaping and Design Clinic offered detailed garden design advice.

Award-winning flower farmer Kim O'Brien (@dahliafarmarama) provided bookable Spring Garden Floristry workshops.

For younger attendees there were the free Budding Little Gardeners' Workshops, providing gardening activities ranging from mulching compost into soil to planting seedlings to grow at home. (All National Curriculum linked – Key Stage 1 – worksheets to take home).

In addition there were falconry displays from Beaulieu's resident falconer.

On Saturday 4th May an exclusive Supper Club at lime Wood fine dining experience event took place, presented by Adam Frost and Luke Holder, Lime Wood Chief Director. The pair had collaborated to create a menu using locally-sourced produce, including fruit and vegetables from the Lime Wood greenhouse. For £185 per ticket, strictly limited numbers of guests were able to enjoy Lime Wood's laidback luxury, with drinks, relaxed conversation with the hosts, and a special three course meal served at banqueting type tables in The Scullery.

Over the weekend there was an extended programme of Palace House Victorian Kitchen demonstrations, with BBC TV presenter Chris Bavin introducing 'field to fork' recipes for participants to try at home, and as put together in the historic kitchens by chefs from The Pig and Lime Wood.

In addition there was an Exclusive VIP and Subscriber Club Lounge (sponsored by The Woodland Trust), with extra seating, refreshments and a ‘goody bag’, along with daily talks by the editors of the BBC Gardeners’ World magazine, special guest and sponsor – The Woodland Trust.

There were also…

A multitude of specialist plant nurseries and growers to explore and buy from.

More than 100 high-quality retailers selling garden accessories, décor, tools, equipment and furniture.

The BBC Gardeners’ World Magazine Stage with spring gardening sessions from the TV presenters and special guests.

A Plant Crèche and Wheelbarrow Porter Service.

Showcase Gardens, College Gardens and Beautiful Borders.

Plant Expert Tours of Beaulieu’s Victorian walled gardens with Lucy Chamberlain, Saul Walker, Tamsin Westhorpe and Beaulieu Head Gardener, Kelvin Yapp, plus drop-in Abbey Cloisters herb garden tours with the Beaulieu garden team.

A variety of workshops.

The BBC Good Food Market.

Access to all areas to Beaulieu’s grounds, gardens and attractions.

Well-behaved dogs on leads were welcome in the outdoor areas.

VERDICT

I thoroughly enjoyed my day at this year's event at Beaulieu, helped too by the sunny, dry weather on the day of my visit (and indeed it was good for show visitors over much of the weekend, if overcast with rain at times on the Sunday).

To me this year's Spring Fair seemed especially well-organised, with careful attention to detail having been made to help visitors get maximum possible pleasure and benefit from their visit. Certainly those I spoke to seemed very happy with their day at the show.

It incorporated a wide variety of gardens to enjoy and to provide inspiration, plus a wealth of garden-related items to buy, also plants galore of all types, sold by knowledgable and enthusiastic people!

I should say too that my visit did inspire me with several new ideas to try at home.

As a frequent visitor to Beaulieu (usually for motoring-related events) I was fascinated by recent changes made to the show field area, including the installation of a very smart set of new wooden buildings accommodating administration and public toilet blocks. In addition the Brabazon Restaurant & Coffee Shop has just benefited from a huge investment/upgrade.

I will leave you with a slideshow depicting some more aspects of the show, seen and enjoyed by me during my visit…

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