



Breaking new ground

Top garden designer Cleve West, the man behind the Saga garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show, talks to **Stephen Anderton** about his distinctive style of work. Portraits by **Harry Borden**

CLEVE WEST: WHAT A NAME. It sounds as if it should belong to a cowboy or a porn star; in fact it belongs to a London garden designer who is creating the Saga Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show – this year sponsored by Saga Insurance. He has never even owned a horse.

West has been making show gardens since 1994, when he first exhibited at Hampton Court. At once the press placed him among the *enfants terribles* of garden design for his use of striking spaces reinforced with dramatic sculpture. But *enfants terribles* are supposed to be... well *enfants*, or at least people in their youth. Let me cast discretion to the winds: Cleve West is 47; he's a

grandfather. It's all the odder, then, to meet him because he looks and behaves like a man in his late thirties.

Slim and easy in himself, wearing jeans and T-shirt, he has black cropped hair and dark eyes inherited from his Indian mother. So how did he get here?

He was born in London, his parents in the hotel business, and after a childhood in Somerset, found himself back in London taking an Art and PE degree with an eye to a career in teaching. In fact the teaching was a blind: "Secretly," he says, "I wanted to be an Olympic athlete. Then suddenly I realised, like you do, that I was not going to make it. There were so many ►



Past glories: Cleve
West's Merrill Lynch
Garden at the 2001
Chelsea Show



'I don't want the Saga Garden to be fuddy-duddy,' he says, 'but a contemporary design. That was the deal'



The designer's own London garden with pond. Top, a West garden with fountain, granite and hardwood panels



A low-maintenance West garden with box as ground cover. Below, a 'Garden for learning' at Chelsea, 2001



◀ others better than me." Instead he worked for a fine art publisher. His only green activity was looking after his aunt's garden and pruning the office wisteria.

Gradually gardening became an absorbing interest and he launched his own garden maintenance firm. "I didn't know much about it. I winged it," he admits. "Then I got fed up with mowing lawns, started building gardens and fancied designing them too."

Thereafter things got serious. "I went to the Chelsea Show and thought 'I'd like to have a go at this,' so I did John Brookes's five-week design course at Kew."

He built his first show garden at Hampton Court in 1994. West wanted furniture for the garden, met the sculptor Johnny Woodford and collaborated with him on the garden. It won a Silver Gilt medal and they went on to win three Golds at Hampton Court, followed in 2001 by a Silver Gilt at Chelsea.

In all these gardens West worked hands-on; today he spends more time behind a drawing board in south London than he does outdoors. "I don't do much building now, but I still like to plant because a garden never works out exactly as planned, and it's good to be there to adjust it. It's great working with the owners, too."

West and I meet at his small studio, the desk dominated by a computer. A vast library of gardening books lines one wall. When West is playing with a new design on his drawing board he likes to listen to music. Then the design goes on to the computer. He shows me his plans for the Saga garden; [a click here to turn the plan](#)



A Cleve West and Johnny Woodford garden at Hampton Court, 1998

3D; another click to flip it from side to side. “I don’t want the Saga Garden to be fuddy-duddy,” he says, “but a contemporary design. That was the deal.”

Afterwards we walk to his house round the corner to see his own garden, and he casually knocks up a pumpkin and ginger soup; he and his girlfriend Christine have an allotment nearby. West has made a film of his allotment which is to form part of an art installation created by his brother in Fort Lauderdale, Florida; he is due to be there the next week. The kitchen walls are covered with Christine’s screen prints and West passes me some of his own botanical drawings.

They are beautiful and like nothing I have seen before. They would never win at a Royal Horticultural Society show except in a new category for bizarre life forms. Set down in delicate detail are a single corkscrewing parsnip or a root of celeriac, looking like a cross between a hot-air balloon and a guinea pig.

But I am not to be fobbed off with root crops. Come on Cleve, I say, where is this glamorous life you garden designers lead? All the flitting around the world for rich clients? All the swagger and prima donna attitude? He smiles. “That’s for very few people, it’s not reality. For a start, I’m paying for this Florida trip. Most designers struggle, have to diversify. I’d love to do more drawing. I like writing my column in *The Independent*. If I dream, it’s only about lorry-loads of plants not turning up when I’m building a garden at Chelsea.”

So does he chain himself to his drawing board to

further his reputation? “Actually, a solid day in the office does my head in,” he complains. “I need some time outdoors, preferably planting. When you are working hard physically, you feel you’ve earned your tea. I’m not prepared to play the game of being above practical work, as some designers do. People need help.”

West’s own garden is tiny and grotto-like. Ivy-smothered walls surround a sequence of small cubicles and, as part of the garden’s main axis, there is a pond crossed by a line of square stepping-stones. Some of Johnny Woodford’s elm seats are slumped around like giant eggs and pelvises. The paving is recycled York stone and granite. “I like to think traditional materials are at home in a contemporary garden,” says West.

He shows me a garden a few streets away which he also designed. It has his trademark stepping-stones across a pond. “We did very little new planting, just made use of the plants that were here and added ferns. Some of these trees are just old shrubs raised up on a trunk – viburnums and photinia.” Again there is no lawn; just areas of paving, a deck, the pond and gravel. “I don’t know it all,” says West, “even after 15 years’ designing, but I know how to put what I know together – the plants and landscaping. Too many amateurs think that knowing a few plants will make them a designer; they do it just for fun. For professionals it’s tough and competitive.”

Not all his work is small scale. He is creating a garden for a rather grand house in Normandy with a lake, using lots of grasses and topiary. In Barnes he has devised a drought-tolerant garden for the Wildlife and Wetland Trust, using wooden bird-like structures and simple plantings of yuccas, alliums and phlomis.

But does West prefer a garden to look finished and mature the minute he’s completed it? “Well, it’s nice to plant big and see instant results if you can. But there’s the danger of everything looking too homogenous. It may be frustrating waiting for smaller plants to develop but you get a better garden as a result.”

There speaks the voice of common sense. But where is contemporary design going, I ask. What is the next big thing? The *enfant terrible* thinks long and hard. “Designers are tearing their hair out about whether to be planting for drought or a new ice age. For me, the new thing will be sculpture with plants, abstract topiary, things that bring movement to a garden.” He shows me a photograph of a ribbon of box slithering across gravel in the Normandy garden. “But that’s it for international glamour,” he reminds me. “I don’t really work outside London. I like London. And working here is good for the environmental footprint. Not many air miles.”

West is a kind man, a realist. He tempers his vision with common sense, creating gardens which are striking and sculptural but which are not absurd or outrageous. He gives people gardens they want. As the man says, “People need help.” ■

Countdown to Chelsea Saga’s designer, Cleve West, begins his month-by-month diary. See page 144. **Win free tickets** to the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Visit our website www.saga.co.uk and follow the links to the free prize draw. Our special Chelsea site will also feature news and information on the show and the Saga Garden. To book tickets, turn to our special ticket offer on Page 138.