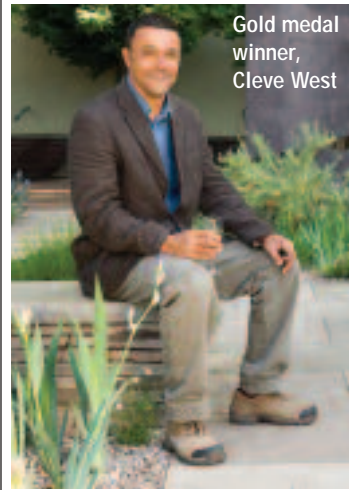


The Saga Insurance Garden

The winning Saga Insurance garden, and, inset, the coveted gold medal



Gold medal winner, Cleve West



It's a gold!

Camilla Swift reports on how Cleve West's novel design won plaudits at the Chelsea show

Wet it may have been, but the 2006 RHS Chelsea Flower Show lived up to its name as the greatest flower show in the world, with floral displays undimmed by the weather, and one of the strongest fields of top garden designers for years.

So we were all extremely pleased that the Saga Insurance Garden, designed by Cleve West, won a coveted gold medal. Bob Sweet, Chelsea Flower Show organiser for the RHS, said: "The judges were particularly impressed by its spatial quality... its trees, and the quality of its sculptural content."

The medal was a first for West – returning to Chelsea after a five-year absence – and a first for Saga Insurance, too. As readers will know, the garden's signatures were its drought-friendly medicinal and edible herbs from around the world, and sturdy sentinels of field maples in the tranquil space at the rear.

The huge water-collecting "vasques" worked beautifully with Cleve's overall theme for the garden, based as it was on the definition of "saga": a story of heroic achievement and marvellous adventure.

That could describe, too, the story of the vasques and the giant top-like "toupis" sculpture. They were found by Cleve by accident while he flicked through an old magazine. He tracked down the designers, only to find they lived in Gascony with no e-mail, a temperamental fax, not

a word of English and a particular loathing of flower shows! But after two days, Cleve West's charm won them round and their journey to England was sealed.

At Chelsea, the pre-opening Sunday was stressful. A day normally given to artful arrangement was instead spent covering delicate flowerheads with plastic and sheltering plants from the wind.

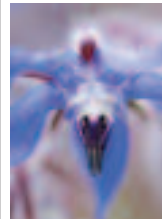
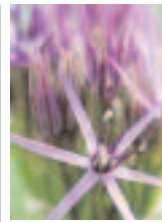
At 6am on the opening Monday, an army of wet workers tiptoed about on bare feet, replanting bent stipas, untying supports from verbascum: even hairdrying the silver sage. But it was all worth it – the result was truly a magical space. The blackened skies even enhanced its unique mix of drama and serenity. The *Telegraph* said the garden

AN ARMY OF WET WORKERS COVERED DELICATE FLOWERS WITH PLASTIC AND SHELTERED PLANTS FROM THE WIND AND RAIN

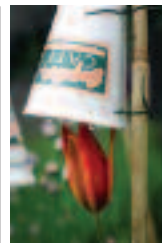
was "intriguing... the most shaggy take on the modern look and therefore one of the most original".

Journalists, garden professionals and the judges alike loved it – and so did the hundreds of Saga customers who came to look at "their" garden.

After the show, the Saga Insurance Garden was to be dismantled and re-created in the Enbrook Park grounds of Saga's headquarters in Sandgate, Folkestone.



Cleve West and his team – with medal on the table



A plastic pot provides shelter from heavy rain



World Cup winner Geoff Hurst plants the last herb in the Saga garden