



## The final countdown

With just days to go to the show, the preparation of the Saga Insurance Garden is reaching its climax. The trees are going in and plants are arriving – and some exhibitors wish it would rain

There are two things you can't guarantee at Chelsea: good weather and an RHS Gold Medal. Everyone involved in the Saga Insurance Garden will obviously do their utmost to secure gold but it may surprise you to know that some of us will also be praying for rain.

Hidden behind the garden will be a shed. Not only will it provide shelter and storage, it will also be an important part of our water feature. Rain from the roof will be channelled to feed the three sculpted vessels (vasques) at the back of the garden. The fact that this feature will work only when it rains has been the subject of much debate. What if it stays dry all week? Do we really want to be praying for rain during the show itself? The point is, rain or no rain, it will be a talking point and, in light of forecasts of drought and hosepipe bans, collecting water is something every gardener will be aware of.

Bad weather during the build-up, however, won't be so welcome. With only 19 days to build, any time lost can have serious knock-on effects. Construction of the boundary wall is the first priority. This we will share with the garden next door. In such cramped conditions it makes sense to get along with neighbours. Thankfully, while medals and awards might suggest an element of competition between designers, there's a great tradition of camaraderie at Chelsea.

Once the walls are up the trees will be planted. With such large root-balls there is only time, space and the machinery to lift them into position during the first week. Being such an important element of the garden they have been inspected weekly for a month before the show for any sign of stress or defoliation.

A delay to the delivery of sculpture from France would also be disastrous, so these will arrive within the first couple of days and be stored safely away from anything that might damage



Field maples (*A. campestres*) and rainwater-fed vasques enhance the back wall

them. Paths, low walls and the three concrete screens will be in position by the time plants start arriving.

The week of planting is almost certainly the most testing time of the whole project. The old adage, "Ne'er cast a clout till May is out," will be on everyone's mind, particularly as we will be using a number of half-hardy herbs. While these may have endured temperatures as low as -8C during winter, a late frost singeing tips of new growth is a real concern. Some of the key plants from Jekka's Herb Farm such as *Eriocephalus africanus* will need careful handling to protect their elegant structure. Just five plants, each with a diameter of 1.5m, will fill one lorry. Other plants such as alliums and *Stipa gigantea* will have delicate stems to protect and some reluctant flowers may even need a little greenhouse encouragement.

It's always useful, therefore, to leave as much time for planting as possible. Not only does it give us more time to consider a number of different associations but also allows the plants to settle and even turn their leaves and flowers toward the sun, helping the garden to look more

natural. Most designers like to finish a day early to give some time to relax before Press Day and judging, but even the most battle-hardened exhibitors are prone to bouts of panic, buying leftovers from the floral marquee as pre-show jitters take hold.

Much of the excitement at Chelsea centres on the judging. Despite what anyone says to the contrary, a Gold Medal is on everyone's wish list.

Our site, at the top of Main Avenue (MA1) is always first to be judged, at 8am, so we'll have to be there early for a final check. Dead leaves, spent flowers and visible plastic pot rims can all lose marks for the garden.

When the judging is over, there is nothing more to do but relax and enjoy what remains of Press Day and Gala Night. Of course this is a tall order. Anyone involved in building a show garden will be physically and mentally exhausted. But it's time to savour the moment. While tears of joy and sadness wait in the wings, for Gala Night at least, everyone will be smiling. ■

See page 142 for your final chance to take up our Chelsea ticket offer

For a closer look at the Saga Insurance Garden, see Bringing Chelsea Home, free to subscribers with this issue