



## **THE HISTORY OF THE RHS CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW**

The 2010 RHS Chelsea Flower Show is the 88<sup>th</sup> show to be held on the grounds of the Royal Hospital and the 'RHS Chelsea Flower Show' is the lasting title of an exhibition with a history of nearly 150 years.

The show was originally called the Royal Horticultural Society's Great Spring Show, first held in 1862, at the RHS garden in Kensington. In 1888 when that garden was closed the RHS found itself without a site in central London at which to hold the show. It was then moved to Temple Gardens near the Embankment, where it was held under canvas until 1911.

### **1910s...**

In 1912, the Temple Show was cancelled to make way for the Royal International Horticultural Exhibition. Sir Harry Veitch, the great nurseryman, secured the grounds of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea, for this one-off event. It proved such a good site for an exhibition that the Great Spring Show was moved there in 1913, where it has taken place almost every year since.

Despite the First World War, the show was held 1914 – 1916, but was cancelled in 1917 and 1918.

### **1920s...**

By the roaring 1920s, the Chelsea Flower Show was back in full swing, the famous Chelsea tea parties were established and Royal visits resumed. In 1926 the show was held a week late due to the General Strike.

### **1930s...**

In 1937, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth celebrated their Coronation Year, and to mark the occasion, a superb Empire Exhibition was staged. It featured wattles from Australia, pines from Canada, brilliant gladioli from East Africa and even a big prickly pear from Palestine.

### **1940s...**

The show was cancelled during the Second World War, as the land was required by the War Office for an anti-aircraft site. Some doubt arose as to whether the show would resume in 1947. The majority of exhibitors wanted a postponement, as stocks of plants were low, staff much depleted and fuel for greenhouses was obtainable only with special permits, but Lord Aberconway (then RHS President) and the RHS

Council felt strongly that the show should resume as soon as possible. As it turned out, the show went ahead in 1947 and it was a great success.

### **1950s...**

The Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 was sufficient cause for a flower show that reflected the celebratory mood of the country. Most members of the Royal family attended that year. Unfortunately, due to a relentless stream of other commitments, the only Royal unable to attend was the Queen herself!

Over almost a century, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show has witnessed numerous changes in horticultural fashion. Show gardens, over the years, have mirrored the changing enthusiasms of garden designers - from the Japanese and topiary gardens of the early days (Japanese dwarf trees, now known as bonsai, were seen at the first Show in 1913), through the rock garden craze during the war years, the paved back yards and cottage gardens of the 1980s, to the contemporary sculptural gardens of the present day.

At the heart of Chelsea is the exhibition of plants staged in the Great Pavilion by nurserymen and women, professionals and amateurs - although the number of amateurs represented today is proportionately much smaller than in the early years. Scientific exhibits, model glasshouses and displays of tools and equipment have remained constant features from the outset.

Exhibitors never fail to rise to the challenge of the temperamental British weather to maintain the prestige of this event. In 1928, for example, there was a heavy storm the night before the opening day and the drains of the marquees became choked with hailstones, which caused flooding. The next morning, the show opened with no sign of the previous night's torrential storm after RHS staff and exhibitors worked through the night to clear debris and repair damage.

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show is still viewed as the most important event in the horticultural calendar and is as popular as ever. With enormous media attention and exhibitor waiting lists longer than ever, there seems no sign of this appetite abating. The new trends constantly appearing at the show illustrate the changing face of garden design and mark this country's ever-changing horticultural history.