

Keeping your ears pinned back at a gardening show might seem an odd way to get a feel for what the visitors 'think of it so far', but eavesdropping is the secret weapon of the garden writer. Under a heavy grey sky in late July, I pinned back my lugs and launched into the throng of visitors at this year's RHS Flower Show held at Tatton Park. It soon became obvious that this show attracts a distinctly down-to-earth crowd and has a completely different feel to it from, say, the Chelsea or Hampton Court Shows held in London. At Tatton a spade's a spade and there wasn't an overpriced bottle of champagne or a vol-au-vent in sight. What this year's show did have was an edible garden with real zing, a dash of pure theatre – including a triffid – and design ideas aplenty for all kitchen gardeners.

“ This show attracts a distinctly down-to-earth crowd ”

Mingling with visitors to the most northerly of the Royal Horticultural Society's summer shows, at Tatton Park in Cheshire, John Walker found himself amongst an earthy, no-nonsense crowd with a keen eye for all things edible.

IT'S THE *real zing*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLIN LEFTLEY

Vivid veg

It's not all that often that thoughtful design, clever use of colour, attention to detail and perfectly-grown vegetables combine in a show garden, but designers Space 2 Place pulled it off a treat. 'Food for Thought' was one of 16 'back to back' gardens whose modest sizes are a real challenge for any designer and are real melting pots of ideas for anyone with only a small garden.

Designers Becky Lomas and Mark Payne wanted to show how the smallest space can be used both for relaxation and for growing your own organic food to combat the 'pace and pollution' of modern living. 'Food for Thought' was among the biggest crowd-pullers at the show and there's little doubt that the superb vegetables – the squashes in particular – grown by local organic gardener Peter Woollam helped seal a resounding 'thumbs up' from folk 'up north'.



As well as vegetables and herbs, the planting included blue campanulas, hemerocallis, nasturtium and pot marigold (all with edible flowers), pink scabious and the unusual parsley pea, with its leafy tendrils. Its Bronze Flora medal certainly didn't do this garden justice.



These eye-catching supports caused quite a stir and were made specially for the show from sheets of plywood coated with copper sheet. The holes were cut with a jig saw and the whole lot was fixed to the wall with wooden battens. Orange-fruited squash 'Uchiki Kuri' and yellow 'Golden Delicious' have been trained through, the almost round fruits working beautifully alongside the round holes.



Feathery fennel combined with kohlrabi 'Purple Vienna' and the tiny pink heads of scabious was just one of the finer foliage combinations found in the garden, set against the orange-red of the raised bed and the terracotta paving.



This column of local grit stone helped create a link with the surrounding area and had been made into a simple water feature by cutting narrow grooves using an angle iron. Water is pumped to the top of the column, creating sound and movement as it trickles down to the copper-backed pool below.

Plant factory

Cheshire's Reaseheath College staged a fascinating display of a range of plants grown on a large scale in the UK and used as raw materials by other industries. The message was that we never stop learning from plants – they act as brain food as well as providing physical nourishment.



Leaving your sunflower heads to ripen is an ideal way of feeding wild birds through the autumn and winter, but in counties like Hampshire, sunflowers are grown on a large scale to produce bird seed commercially.

Herbs in a box

How often have you shoved that old box to the back of the loft or shed, thinking 'One day I'll...?' This simple yet effective box of herbs (below) was part of an impressive exhibit staged by Cheshire County Council. This wooden box, transformed by some blue stain, has nasturtiums spilling out between variegated sage (*Salvia officinalis* 'Tricolor'), chives, lavender and a silver-leaved santolina.



Colourful corn

It was a thrill to find this ornamental variety of sweetcorn grown in a big, bold and pink-tinged block at Tatton. Zea mays 'Quadricolor' grows up to 6ft (1.8m) tall and is grown like conventional sweetcorn, but sadly you can't eat it. Seeds from Thompson & Morgan.



Willow is familiar as a simple and natural fence or screen, as shown here, but it is grown increasingly as 'biomass' and used as a source of renewable fuel to produce energy. Behind this fence is living willow, being grown as coppice to provide lots of young shoots for a variety of uses. ▷