

Tale from the Garden

For the first time in its 108-year history, the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is being held in the Autumn & you've been able to watch live coverage all this week on BBC2.

At this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show one of the gardens is sponsored by the Bible Society & designed by Sarah Eberle. It marks the launch of a nationwide campaign to see community gardens created and inspired by the Psalm 23 Garden. This will be an opportunity for people to come together, as pandemic conditions ease, to create shared, beautiful spaces that reflect the insights and themes of the Psalm and offer places of restoration and sanctuary for the future.

About the garden ...

Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', could have been written for us as we live through the Coronavirus pandemic. Its message is one of hope, encouragement and solace. Sarah Eberle's interpretation of it is a garden that offers a place to breathe, re-engage with nature, and feel mentally, physically and spiritually restored. The garden is inspired by the landscape of Dartmoor, where Sarah grew up, and takes the form of a place of sanctuary, a haven. It draws you in and allows you to spend time with the soothing character of the landscape. It reflects both the journey and the destination found in Psalm 23.



Drystone walls, full of ferns & alive with the sound of falling water echo the designer's Dartmoor roots. Native plants such as polypody ferns (*Polypodium vulgare*), hawthorn and guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*) enhance the countryside feel of this garden. Huge granite boulders make a striking statement – and you have to look out for the sign of a rabbit's visit, which adds a humorous yet realistic touch.

Ferns are highly versatile, ancient and mysterious plants which require very little care and attention and are untroubled by pests and diseases. They have marvellously intricate foliage with architectural pinnate leaf forms which look particularly beautiful as they erupt from new fronds, appearing bright green against the decaying leaves. These new signs of life are the 'fiddleheads', so-called because the very tops - furled tight when young - look like the tuning end of a fiddle. Similar in looks (and taste) to asparagus, fiddleheads are usually only available for a few weeks in the spring before the fern leaves unravel. Ferns are shade-loving plants growing best in dappled shade rather than complete darkness, making them perfect for acting as a graceful backdrop to showier plants such as flowering or berry-producing shrubs. Ferns are ideal for adding a fresh, woodland feel to a garden and often work most effectively when planted in groups, perhaps with a variegated evergreen climber scrambling in-between.

Ferns are beautiful foliage plants that will add softness and movement to shadier areas of the garden. They vary in shapes, colours and sizes, so you can choose something that will add stature, such as a tree fern or royal fern, or opt for the lower-growing, but no less graceful shuttlecock or lady fern. The stately tree fern 'Dicksonia Antarctica' is thought to be one of the oldest plants in the world & should be considered a staple plant for shade in any garden.

Ferns first show up in fossil records from a time over 100 million years BEFORE dinosaurs walked the Earth. In fact, ferns grew before flowering plants existed. There are thousands of species from those which are a few inches tall to others which resemble trees.

Long ago, people couldn't explain how ferns reproduced since they lack flowers or seeds. Fern seeds were thought to make one invisible! Today we know that ferns truly don't have flowers or seeds. So how do they reproduce? They have "spores." With sunlight and photosynthesis, the spores grow into what is called 'gametes' which are able to fertilize the sperm and start to move it into the fern plant. This is completely different from anything that happens with any other sort of flower! No wonder people were confused. It was this mystery of the non-flowering fern that led to folklore about mystical flowers as seeds. Since the seeds couldn't be seen, they were believed to be invisible. According to lore, they could only be found once a year on St. John's Eve (June 23), also called Midsummer Eve. The possessor of these "seeds" could understand the language of birds, find buried treasure, and have the strength of forty men! This folklore is also intertwined with Midsummer Day (June 24); bathing in the dew on this morning was said to bring youthful glow and healing.

Historically, ferns have been an important source of medicine for various ailments, especially for ancient tribes. And you might be interested to know that when you can't find a Dock Leaf, the spores on the underside of a fern provides relief to the stinging nettle (which is often nearby)!

The fern symbolizes **eternal youth**. To the indigenous Maori of New Zealand, the fern represented new life and new beginnings. To the Japanese, the fern symbolizes family and the hope for future generations. According to Victorians, the fern symbolized humility and sincerity.

WHAT INSPIRED *THE PSALM 23 GARDEN* DESIGN?

"To me, Psalm 23 is a parable of life," explains Sarah to *Country Living*. "It's about the good and the bad through your life experiences, and ultimately ending up where you feel more content and at peace."

The garden represents these experiences and is based on the idea of a journey through a landscape.

"Imagine yourself on a country walk, and you come across this place which is so auspicious – maybe a tree, with the sun dappling through the canopy, or a brook or stream with a nearby rock where you can sit – and it draws you in, gets you to stop and just be for a few minutes."

The naturalistic design features rocky terrain, inspired by the rock tors on the moors, with water features, including a small cascade and pool, inspired by the streams and rivers. To get to the back of the garden you must either cross the stepping-stones in the water or climb a series of rocks that rise up a slope. "It's not an easy journey to this place of sanctuary, which is very much like our lives," she says.

The words of Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me In the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil: my cup overflows. Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

The garden is small, at just 10m x 10m, but it is hoped this little haven will have a big impact. The Bible Society, who sponsored the garden, is using its creation to launch a nationwide campaign to encourage the development of community gardens, in places like schools and churches. The idea for this space of sanctuary was first conceived before the pandemic, back in 2019. But for the 2020 show which was cancelled, its message of the healing powers of nature, and hope through adversity, have become ever more prescient over the past 18 months. It is a garden of its time, which is strange considering it was planned before the pandemic hit. Now there's a much bigger awareness of how important green space and nature and gardens are to us for mental wellbeing, particularly in urban areas. Community gardens can break down isolation, bring people together with a shared objective and build self-determination as well. These issues are so much more relevant now and people are more aware of them.

And what will happen to the *The Psalm 23 Garden* after Chelsea?

The garden will continue to make a difference after the show too, at its new home at the Winchester Hospice in Hampshire. It'll be such a lovely place to go to for both the patients and their families, because it is a deeply spiritual garden.

Take some time this week to sit in your garden, journey round the scene before you, the greens turning into Autumn colours, the breeze stirring the leaves, the sun dappling through the trees, breath in the fresh smells & hear the sounds of nature ... and find your peace.