



SHOWTIME!

A Devon nursery owner is preparing to return to the Chelsea Flower Show after a two-year break, writes CATHERINE COURTENAY

Sarah Conibear of Westcountry Nurseries has won three gold medals at Chelsea for her display of lupins. She grows about 2,000 plants in order to ensure she has 150 perfect specimens to take to the show. It's a horticultural labour of love.

A seasoned Chelsea exhibitor, 2018 is her first time back after a two-year break. She seems remarkably relaxed about the forthcoming show as I chat to her – although it is March and we've not yet hit the key time for Chelsea lupins.

"They need to have buds in April, or you'll know they aren't going to make it," she says. But perhaps she's a little confident; the plants are looking good she tells me and the recent cold snap has probably helped to trigger their growth with renewed vigour.

"Muggy winters are not good for lupins, I'm sure it's why they peter out when it's too wet and soggy."

But the lead up to the most famous flower show on earth is always nerve wrenching and, with lupins' key time being June, Sarah has to push her plants to get them to flower three to four weeks ahead.

"I just watch and hope," she says, with a smile. "People go through so much anxiety but there's nothing you can do."

She recounts several nightmare flower show experiences including flat tyres on the way up and one time when the stand collapsed in on itself – although that wasn't Chelsea, thank goodness.

"We go up on the Saturday but don't set up until Sunday. I don't



want them to go over too soon during the show. Chelsea is funny, it can be boiling hot or freezing cold in the marquee so I always set it up last minute."

With just her and husband Rob, once set up, Sarah has to be on hand throughout show week, ready to talk to visitors. She says they are always drawn to the lupins, their tall spires and fabulous colours having such a dramatic effect.

Sarah first fell in love with lupins and started growing them after they were featured on a TV programme in the late nineties. She's originally from Dorset, but has been in Devon for many years. From 1994 she spent seven years as head gardener for the Clovelly Estate in North Devon.

ABOVE: Sarah with a basket of lupins and her companions, Charlie Brown and Rupert

LEFT: Sarah has to push her plants to get them to flower three to four weeks ahead

Gardening hadn't always been in her blood, she was a musician until the age of 30 when she decided to go to horticultural college. "I think I was stuck inside working one day and I just wanted to be outside," she says, on her life changing decision. She also remembers a book, *A Gull on the Roof* by Derek Tangye as having a big effect on her; she was drawn to its tale of living in a remote location by the coast and growing daffodils for a living.

She says she loved her time at college, learning about plants, and to this day she's enthralled by gardens, making a point of visiting as many as she can during the year. "Sometimes I wish I could leave a legacy of a whole garden, but it's such hard work!"

'Chelsea is funny, it can be boiling hot or freezing cold in the marquee so I always set it up last minute'

Her nursery now takes up all her time, although music still features strongly, she plays clarinet in the North Devon Sinfonia and Hartland Chamber Orchestra and sings in the North Devon Choral Society.

"I can't imagine life without music and plants," she says.

Is there any similarity between the two?

Perhaps there is, she says.

"You have to be so focused with learning an instrument and give up hours and hours of your time to it, in that way it's the same with these plants."

It took eight years before Sarah won her first gold at Chelsea; perfection for the judges (blooms which are not blunted on the tip, not half out) is hard to achieve.

But nothing will take away from the pride in creating her floral wall of colour.

"It's very rewarding doing the display; we are one of the most photographed stands, people are just amazed by the lupins, and their scent. When we load the lorry then open the back doors the scent is knockout. It's really noticeable early in the morning and in the evening – people always comment on it."

"Chelsea is a big deal, a big show and it's a great privilege to be there." ♦

ALSO AT CHELSEA

Penny's Primulas, aka Staddon Farm Nurseries near Holsworthy, will once again be returning to the Grand Pavilion. Penny and Melvyn Jones have a National Collection of *Primula sieboldii* which they display amid a carpet of epimediums and ferns.

Elsewhere in the pavilion, the Bowdens stand will feature one of the most expensive items ever displayed at Chelsea – a gold and enamel egg encrusted with diamonds and pearls.

The Royal Egg, which is valued at over £1 million, will sit in a temple folly in a garden featuring a fern stumpery, bamboo grove and a central area of hostas.

The egg was designed and commissioned by former Royal Household employee Jim Frecklington, who built the Australian state coach which featured in Bowdens' 2017 Commonwealth-themed Chelsea display.

Tim Penrose from Bowdens says: "Jim was at Buckingham Palace Mews and has made coaches for the Queen including her Diamond Jubilee coach.

"The egg was made for the Queen and has never been seen in public before.

"It will be behind bullet proof glass."