

The arts and crafts garden

Multi-award-winning designer **Ruth Willmott** tells the story of the garden she'll be creating at this year's Chelsea Flower Show - inspired by the work of visionary Arts and Crafts designer William Morris, famous for his iconic wallpaper and textile designs



PICTURE: MICHELLE GARRATT

I DON'T THINK IT'S AN ACCIDENT that my first Main Avenue show garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is a garden I've designed for Morris & Co., the company founded by the Victorian designer, craftsman and artist William Morris in 1861.

As an art student, my mother designed and painted samples of wallpaper to make ends meet and her love of art and design stayed with me, eventually leading me to become a garden designer. Like Morris, a love of the natural world has always inspired my designs, so when I was thinking about designing a garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, the two naturally came together.

As I explored his life and work further, there seemed to be an added serendipity to the garden – Kelmscott House, Morris's home in London and now home to the William Morris Society, is only minutes away from my design studio in Chiswick.

More than any other designer of the decorative arts, William Morris brought the natural world indoors through the many wallpapers and textiles he produced during his lifetime. He drew on countryside and hedgerow plants to populate patterns and looked to old-fashioned flowers from the garden to inform his designs.

Incredibly, samples of every one of his wallpapers are still preserved today in the Morris & Co. archive in Buckinghamshire, alongside a treasure trove of historical log-books, printed and woven textiles and some of the original hand-carved wooden printing blocks that would have been used to craft his beautiful and intricate wallpapers.

Immersing myself in these, and imagining the joy of being surrounded by Morris's patterns in the form of flowers and trees, became the inspiration for the Morris & Co. garden at RHS Chelsea. From the seed of an idea, the concept grew – a modern interpretation of two of Morris's most iconic wallpaper designs, using colour, pattern and plants to return them to the natural outdoor setting that inspired them. ▶

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While the plants must look great, I also want them to reflect a natural countryside setting and provide a welcoming environment for the beasts and bugs that share the space

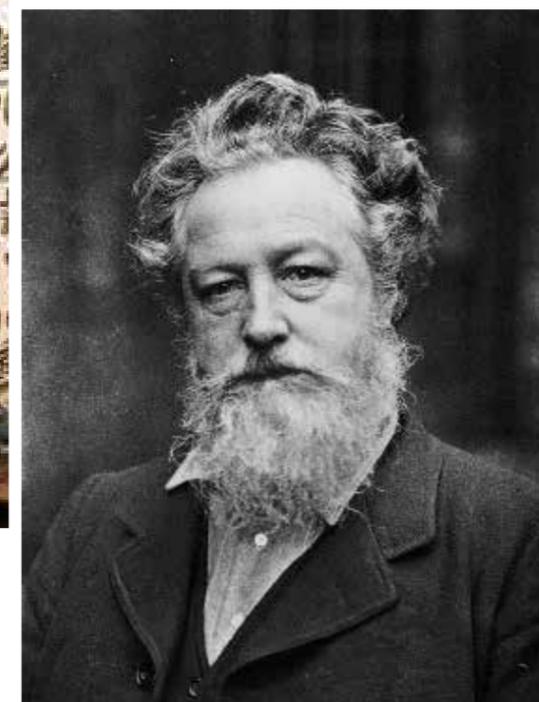
The garden layout, a series of simple interconnecting pathways, will reflect his first wallpaper design, 'Trellis', a pattern influenced by the rose trellis in the garden of his home in Kent; while at the centre of the garden, an intricate hand-crafted metal pavilion will reference the metal inlays on the wooden printing blocks used to make his celebrated 'Willow Boughs' design, inspired by the weeping willows near his country retreat in the Cotswolds.

Planting will also be drawn from Morris's designs, reflecting his love of colour and pattern in a palette of earthy reds and apricot tones with colour accents of whites, blues and restful greens; while plants featured in other well-known Morris & Co. patterns will also be used, including Willow, Hawthorn and Acanthus.

Although it's a Chelsea Show Garden, it's crucial to me that the garden embraces and works with nature. So, while the plants must look great,



NATURAL THEMES: Trellis and Willow Bough are two classic William Morris wallpaper designs



THE WILLIAM MORRIS GARDEN: Ruth's Chelsea design will reflect the style of the Arts and Crafts movement



IMAGES: ELLE DUNN, WALKER GREENBANK; PHOTO STUDIO MK

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Morris was an early advocate of using native species amongst long-cultivated non-natives to attract birds and bees, an approach I use in all my garden designs. So, I'll be mixing cottage garden favourites such as roses, iris, peonies, dianthus, geranium, foxgloves and soft velvety foliage *Stachys byzantina* with wildlife-friendly shrubs that provide shelter, shade and food for birds, insects, bees and butterflies.

As one of the earliest proponents of sustainability, Morris believed that the most successful gardens work with nature to create environments in which jobs such as pollination are left to the wildlife – a philosophy I share wholeheartedly.

Of course, the naturalistic world that inspired Morris was largely to be found in the rural landscape surrounding his country homes, while our Chelsea Show Garden will be sited in the heart of London. To create the sense of being immersed

ABOVE: A wooden printing block at the Morris & Co archive

in a country garden, I'll be using an abundance of plants. For me, a garden, whether urban or rural, should always have a far greater proportion of soft planting over hard surfaces.

Central to the design is a quadrant layout, with a series of simple inter-connecting pathways forming the shape of the garden, and it's this structure that will allow me to manage the volume of plants. It's important for any garden to have a structure underneath the soft planting that allows the plants to ramble and roam freely within the gridlines you have created. Making a garden a welcoming space for wildlife doesn't mean you have to turn it into an untamed nature reserve!

Alongside a love of the natural world, Morris's other great belief was in hand craftsmanship and traditional manufacturing techniques. Simplicity

CREATIVE FORCE: William Morris was the towering figure in late 19th-century design and the main influence on the Arts and Crafts movement. His patterns were based on flora and fauna, and his products were inspired by the vernacular or domestic traditions of the British countryside



and craft lay at the heart of the Arts and Craft movement and is a theme that still runs through Morris & Co.'s products today.

A Chelsea Show Garden is never just about the designer. Creating the finished garden that you see at the show or on the TV involves dozens of skilled and dedicated craftspeople, each adding another creative layer to the finished design. Staying true to Morris's ethos, The Morris & Co. Garden is a collaboration between a whole host of talented craftspeople – stonemasons, water specialists, metal workers, tilemakers and basket weavers – using traditional arts and crafts methods alongside modern-day craftsmanship to create the many artistic elements that characterise the design. It may sound clichéd, but the garden simply wouldn't have happened without them and their range of expertise.

At the centre of the garden, a metal pavilion will feature posts and screens layered with two contrasting colours, much like Morris's iconic prints, and laser-cut with the Willow Boughs pattern, using modern crafting techniques by metal worker James Booth at Outdoor Design.

The same pattern will also be inlaid into a sequence of water channels flowing throughout the garden created by water expert Martin Kelley, while clay tiles, expertly hand-crafted in Kent by Adam Spicer, and riven buff Yorkstone paving

“ Creating a sustainable garden isn't just about the plants

will demonstrate more traditional arts and crafts methods.

To surround the garden, Peter Dibble, a traditional basket weaver, will weave fencing using willow grown on his own willow bed in Suffolk. With craftsmanship at its core, I hope it's a garden of which William Morris would approve.

Creating a sustainable garden isn't just about the plants. It also means ensuring a life after the show, so that the garden isn't simply a transitory installation for one week in May, but will help to seed permanent gardens that can be enjoyed for years to come.

To that end, after the show, elements of the Morris & Co. Garden will be relocated to several new community gardens in Islington, London, with the goal of helping to inspire a new generation of gardeners.

In another twist of serendipity, the site is located around the corner from the building where Morris's prints were first produced more than 160 years ago. I can't help thinking the Morris & Co. Garden was meant to be. 🌱

Find out more

The Morris & Co. Garden can be seen at The RHS Chelsea Flower Show from 24-28 May 2022.

● ruthwillmott.com

● morrisandco.sandersondesigngroup.com