Meet Chelsea's star players: This year's Chelsea Flower Show boasts a record number of Show Gardens, designed by some top-notch gardeners

- Over 165,000 visitors are expected to descend on the Chelsea Flower Show
- Here we pick out the very best gardens to see at the 2016 show
- Jo Thompson and Diarmuid Gavin are just some of the designers to watch

By CONSTANCE CRAIG SMITH FOR WEEKEND MAGAZINE

On a bitterly cold January day, when spring still seemed a very long way away, the RHS unveiled the highlights of this year’s Chelsea Flower Show to the gardening press.

The presence of Mary Berry – who is an RHS ambassador – caused a flutter of excitement, but an even greater thrill was the intriguing list of gardens that was announced.

Chelsea 2016 is shaping up to be a blockbuster year, with a record number of Show Gardens: 17, up from 15 last year. And after all the criticism at the lack of women designers in 2015, six highly regarded female designers have Show Gardens this year.

Diarmuid Gavin's Harrods Eccentric British Garden, inspired by the mad designs of W Heath Robinson, promises 'excitement and movement'

So whether you've got a ticket to Chelsea, or will be watching the nation's premier gardening event from the comfort of your sofa, there's lots to look forward to.

DON'T MISS
- Ellie Goulding and Caspar Jopling's wedding: Staff erect marquees, teepen and a stage at stately home ahead of star-studded nuptials
- Love Island's Theo Campbell leaves hospital with seven stitches in his eye and 'doesn't want to believe his vision is gone forever' after accident
- Billie Faiers looks incredible in a bright floral swimsuit as she enjoys a sunny stint with son Arthur, two, and husband Greg in Marbella
- "Don't waste your time with explanations": Tina O'Brien shares ANCIENT cryptic post as fans speculate she's 'Turning' at ex Ryan Thomas's baby reveal
- Nadia Sawalha divides the family hot tub in a red swimsuit as she poses fun at THAT emotionally charged public phone-call... amid bitter feud with sister
- Nothing happened: Wayne Rooney breaks silence and says he 'did not enter lift alone with girl in Vancouver hotel' while woman in club wanted an "autograph"
- James Bond's Aston Martin is pursued by villains in high-octane chase as filming continues on No Time To Die in Italy Cotting
- Chloe Sims' OTHER sister Frankie steps out with Dami to film scenes for TOWIE... as she becomes the final sibling to join the cast Deezing
- Georgia Kousoulou looks radiant in a plunging dress as she returns to work on TOWIE... after stitching anxiety battle forced her to quit Sink Or Swim
- Scarlett Moffatt turns heads in a gored polka dot shirt dress as she pushes a
This year we'll again be able to enjoy wall-to-wall television coverage of the show on the BBC, presented by Weekend's own Monty Don, Sophie Raworth, Joe Swift, Nicki Chapman and James Wong. But who are the ones to watch?

THE FAMOUS FACES

Several of this year's designers are also familiar faces on TV. Chris Beardshaw, who's morphed effortlessly from heart-throb presenter on shows like Real Takeovers and Housecall to internationally renowned designer, has made a garden for Great Ormond Street, which will be relocated to the children's hospital once the show is over.

Matthew Wilson, a regular on TV gardening programmes and Gardeners' Question Time, is creating a garden paying tribute to the beauty of York Minster and Yorkshire. Andy Sturgeon, a former Best In Show winner who has presented the TV coverage of Chelsea for several years, is making a very welcome return as a designer with a Show Garden inspired by the geological events that have shaped our landscape.

THE LADIES

Jekka McVicar, Britain's Queen of Herbs, is moving out of the Great Pavilion that houses stands from nurseries and plant societies and designing her first Show Garden, called A Modern Apothecary.

It's filled with herbs including unusual varieties such as yarrow and salad burnet. Rosy Hardy, one of the most respected plantswomen in the country, is making her debut as a Chelsea Show Garden designer with Forever Freepolk, inspired by chalk streams such as the River Test, which runs past her garden in Hampshire.

Jo Thompson, one of only two women designers with Show Gardens last year, was thought very unlucky not to get a gold medal in 2015.

She's back this year with an urban communal garden inspired by the nearby Chelsea Barracks.

The garden will be relocated after the show to the Royal British Legion Village in Aylesbury, Kent. And Catherine MacDonald, known for her contemporary style, is doing her first Chelsea Show Garden, with a glasshouse and tropical plants.

AND LOOK OUT FOR...

One of the more intriguing gardens is by Nick Bailey, curator at the Chelsea Physic Garden, which celebrates the beauty to be found in the mathematics and algorithms of plant life. And Huan Ruoxi, a young designer who won a gold medal with his debut

CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW BY NUMBERS

1913 was the year the Royal Horticultural Society show was first held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea. Apart from during the two world wars, it's been held there every year since.

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