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MADE IN CHELSEA

How does an RHS Chelsea garden grow? Garden designer Manoj Malde takes Velvet's Melanie Taylor behind the scenes of his 2025 show garden

The countdown to this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show is on. For several weeks the Royal Hospital Chelsea is abuzz, not just with bees, but the hum of machinery as some of the world's most talented designers, landscapers and specialist contractors work their magic to bring the nation's greatest garden show to life. Ahead of the 2025 show, we sat down with renowned garden designer Manoj Malde in his Hertfordshire studio, to discuss his Tackle HIV, Challenging the Stigma Garden sponsored by ViiV Healthcare – and his top tips for our own gardens.

Manoj, this is your third time at RHS Chelsea after your Beneath a Mexican Sky show garden in 2017 and your RHS and Eastern Eye Garden of Unity feature garden in 2023. The latter, of course, holds special significance for you and husband Clive, as it was the location for your wedding! So how does it feel to be back again?

It feels great. My debut RHS Chelsea garden, Beneath a Mexican Sky in 2017, seems a long way back, but do you know Mel, it's still talked about so much. I think people remember it for the joy of colour. So many visitors said they could stand in front of that garden all day because it just made them smile. And I think that's what gardens



Manoj Malde Picture: Paul Madeley

are all about - bringing joy and happiness to people. We live such hectic lives, it's really important we have a space where we can just relax, chill out and be at peace. So yes, that garden brings back lots of fond memories for me.

As the Diversity and Inclusion Ambassador for the RHS, it was important to me that my second garden, The RHS and Eastern Eye Garden of Unity in 2023, was fully

inclusive and accessible with braille posts and paths wide enough for wheelchairs. Of course, getting married on the garden was personally very special, but for me it was also really important that the RHS is seen to be inclusive and diverse. I was making a big statement that if you want to be part of something good then you have to put in the effort to make the change.

My garden this year conveys equally important messages and, as in previous years, I'm especially proud of the team helping me to bring it to life. Designers often get the credit, but we can't achieve success without the amazing expertise, dedication and teamwork of the landscapers, project managers, contractors, suppliers, growers and, of course, the planting teams.

Let's talk about the inspiration behind your Tackle HiV, Challenging The Stigma Garden, which I understand is based on the molecular structure of HIV medication?

Yes that's right, this all started with Welsh Rugby star Gareth Thomas, who set up the Tackle HiV Campaign after his experience of living with HIV and the stigma he, his husband and family faced. Sponsored by ViiV Healthcare and Tackle HiV, the garden is one of hope and positivity with a respectful nod to what has gone before.



Manoj Malde's
Tackle HIV Challenging
the Stigma Garden 2025 (visual)

My design process began with cutting out hexagonal shapes after requesting the formula of the HIV medication. As I played around with these different-sized shapes, the more I started recognising pathways and planting areas and that's how the garden came about.

The bronze hexagonal pergola will be a talking point, but the planting and other features in the garden have a lot of symbolism too don't they?

The chemical structure of the medication is repeated in the hexagons of both the paving and the water feature. My good friend Ralph Bourdoukan's beautiful sculptures are a gentle, respectful tribute to all the people who have sadly passed. They're made of wire and are gauzy, you can see through them, so they channel positivity. The mesh bridge over the water suggests a leap of faith as you make the transition into a healthier life and the seating represents community and is etched with the words undetectable = untransmissible which is a tribute to the effectiveness of HIV medication. The multi-stemmed trees, *Zelkova serrata*,



Water feature build by Weather It for
Manoj's 2025 garden

frame the garden to give you the feeling of a warm hug from nature and their resilience against drought is symbolic of the resilience of the HIV community. I wanted trees that would be survivors in our changing climate. The Californian poppies *Eschscholzia californica* 'Red Chief' weave through the garden, representing the solidarity of the iconic red ribbon of HIV awareness. The hexagons are also echoed in the wiry stem growth of the *Corokia cotoneaster* and the thorns of the *Aralia elata*, angelica tree, remind us of the importance of getting tested.

So how is the build progressing?

It's going very well; it's a fantastic collaboration of highly skilled artisans, who after months of Zoom calls, have everything under control on the ground. Landscaping consultant Gareth Wilson is overseeing the build by Justin Himpson and the team at JJH Landscapes, with Els Tisserand of Tisserand English Gardens, steel fabricators Weather It Ltd, Nick Groves of Riverdale Falls and In-lite outdoor lighting. The pergola is looking amazing. I made some slight adjustments on the water feature, moving some of the individual hexagons, to tweak the sound it makes. I'm visiting my growers Kelways each month to check on the plants and Elveden are supplying the hornbeam hedging.

What tips would you give Velvet readers for their gardens?

■ Infuse your gardens with colour

Don't be scared of colour; use inexpensive tester pots to test out colours on benches and fences. For Beneath a Mexican Sky

I had a board rendered in plaster by my contractor. Painted in shades of oranges, pinks and cappuccinos, I kept it on my desk and watched it for four months from January to April. Every day I'd look at it to see how the colours changed with the light. The orange shade I was thinking of using actually looked dirtier as the light got brighter, and amazingly, the colour I wasn't going to use at all, ended up being the one I chose.

Your garden is part of your home and, just as you'd spend time living in a new house before doing anything to it, spend time in that garden, get a feel for the space and how the transition to the outdoor room works. People often say to me, "Oh but I don't have a garden, I live in a flat" – but group together just a few houseplants of different heights and you've built yourself an indoor garden.

People think adding colour to a garden is all about flowers, but just as you would indoors, introduce coloured accessories and furniture. Consider the vast array of beautiful tiles available to create a feature wall of tiles that are either 3D, have a metallic finish or a geometric print.

■ When it comes to lighting, less is more

I'm very aware of dark skies and use small fittings with a warm white light focusing downwards to avoid disturbing wildlife. When lighting gardens, less is definitely more: all you need to create an ambience, is a warm and inviting glow.

■ Water is a key element in any garden

The sound of water is not only relaxing, but it's vital for habitat creation. You don't need a big water feature to attract wildlife. Simply get two bowls and leave them outside for the frogs, birds and bees. I've even had Muntjac deer at the water bowls in my garden.

■ Choose hedging over fences

I appreciate not everyone has the space for hedging, but if you can, choose hedging to provide habitat and food for wildlife, or cover fences with climbers. Hedges capture pollution brilliantly as their compact growth and smaller leaves absorb more pollution than some trees. Their roots also bind the soil together to mitigate flooding.

■ An unkempt garden supports more wildlife and in turn nurtures us too

I'm glad overly tidy gardens are gradually disappearing. We're increasing biodiversity by moving away from traditionally manicured lawns edged with narrow borders.

Leave dandelions to feed the bees and plant both native and non-native plants.

The greater variety you have, the more pollinators and wildlife you'll attract into your garden, the sounds of which relax our senses and bring us yet more joy. We always talk about increasing biodiversity for wildlife but relish the blissful benefits of wildlife to us and our wellbeing.

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show runs from 20-24 May, if you haven't already snapped up one of the sold-out tickets, watch the excellent BBC coverage for ideas that you can translate into your own garden. For help and advice on bringing a Chelsea vibe to your garden, contact Melanie via melanie.taylor@hazelwoodlandscapes.co.uk