

Gardening: The Chelsea garden taking a trip Down Under

As preparations for RHS Chelsea reach their busy climax, Velvet's Melanie Taylor sits down with designer Max Parker-Smith to learn how an epic Australian train journey sparked the idea for his travel-inspired garden at this year's show



The design for Max Parker-Smith's 2026 Chelsea garden draws on his travels Down Under. If, like me, you've experienced the transformative power of travel, you'll love Max Parker-Smith's show garden at RHS Chelsea this year. Sponsored by tour operator Journey Beyond, the South Australian Tourism Commission and Tourism Western Australia, Max's 'Journey Beyond The Tracks: Adelaide to Perth Garden' brings to life his Indian Pacific train trip from Adelaide to Perth, showcasing Australia's incredible botanical history.



Max Parker Smith travelling from Adelaide to Perth on the Indian Pacific CREDIT Journey Beyond

Inspired by the iconic Nullarbor railway journey, it's a garden of two halves. A central pergola modelled on a train carriage, dissects the space into two distinct landscapes. One reflects the urban greening vision of Adelaide

as a National Park City, the other features the outback planting of Western Australia's sand plains.



Adelaide Hills, Mount Lofty Gardens CREDIT South Australian Tourism Commission

Max is incorporating the salvaged railway pegs he collected in the remote outpost of Cook, alongside reclaimed jarrah timber sleepers. His ochre-coloured hard landscaping, use of corten steel and sustainable polished eco concrete paving reflect the harsh industrial ruggedness of the outback. A *Vitus vinifera* scrambling over the

garden is a subtle nod to the active wine industries in both South Australia and Western Australia.



Eagle Bay, Dunsborough CREDIT Tourism Western Australia

“The Kwongan sand plains of Western Australia have the most fascinating prehistoric planting,” says Max. “They’ve evolved over millions of years to the point where they grow in harsh conditions with very low nutrient substrates. They look and

feel prehistoric, and you’re transported back in time. It’s a fascinating group of plants people over here should know about.”



Max Parker-Smith researching local flora in Kings Park Botanic Garden Perth Western Australia CREDIT Tourism Western Australia

Nurseries in Spain and Cornwall are growing Max’s unusual plants. His Spanish nurseries, one in Águilas and another in Barcelona, are growing the same plants to maximise getting some flowering at exactly the right time for Chelsea but it’s in the hands of the weather gods. “I’ll admit it’s not the most relaxing process in the world,” says Max. “I can’t just

drive an hour down the A3 to see them. A February storm swept over the 200-acre nursery taking many of my plants with it.”



Melaleuca ericifolia (library image)

Max's standout plants are the Jurassic-like grass trees, *Xanthorrhoea glauca*, though they're expensive and difficult to source here. Other planting that could work in East Anglian gardens

are *Callistemons* (bottlebrushes) and *Melaleuca ericifolia* (a form of myrtle

commonly known as the swamp paperbark or tea tree). "They're very tough," says Max. "They can take moisture, and dry conditions once established, and are also fine at cooler temperatures. The *Banksia robur* (swamp banksia) might also work as it is not so frost sensitive once established."



Adenanthus sericeus (library image)

The compact and bushy habit of *Eucalyptus gunnii* 'Azura', makes them suitable for smaller gardens. Another of Max's favourites is the *Adenanthos sericeus* (woollybush) known for its soft velvety foliage, which he describes as "a

lovely frothy shrub, kind of pine-like, but a lot more whimsical or ethereal".



Max Parker Smith on the Indian Pacific between Adelaide and Perth consulting a plant list CREDIT Journey Beyond

When creating resilient gardens to withstand changing climate and weather conditions, it's important to understand and connect with your space. "Focus on diversity and plant a wide variety of plants to see what works," says Max. "Observe and commit to the long-term goal of a

resilient garden that looks after itself, rather than one that looks pretty but requires heavy watering.



Kangaroo in the vines at The Lane Vineyard
Adelaide Hills CREDIT South Australian
Tourism Commission

“Being a real observer, you know, that’s exactly what the best people in our industry are doing, that’s why they’re so good at what they do. There’s no secret; the home gardener is just as capable of observing and knowing a garden as the best in our industry, it just depends on how much time and effort you put into it. And of

course, mulch as much as possible.”

Post-show, the hard landscaping, built by Olly Gregson and his team at Hardwood Landscapes, moves to Longleat Zoo, whilst the planting will relocate to a south-facing border in Kensington Gardens for an experimental research project on climate resilience.



The design for Max Parker-Smith's 2026 Chelsea garden draws on his travels Down Under

Max hopes his unique and colourful plants and materials palette will create an impactful yet relatable experience for visitors to RHS Chelsea. He wants people to envision themselves in his inviting space

and incorporate ideas at home whilst encouraging us all to travel.

Max’s garden celebrates South Australia and Western Australia and showcases hardy plants that are ready for the changing climate conditions over here. We really should be taking notes on these gardening lessons from Down Under so that we’re better prepared for tomorrow.

The RHS Chelsea Flower Show runs May 19-23 2026. For more information about the garden’s sponsors see:

journeybeyondrail.com.au/adelaide-to-perth-garden/

southaustralia.com/campaigns/uk-guide-to-south-australia

westernaustralia.com/uk/home

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