

Weekend: See the Gainsborough garden at RHS Sandringham

Inspired by one of Suffolk's most celebrated artists, Thomas Gainsborough, the county's Freddy Whyte has created a masterpiece of a garden for RHS Sandringham. Melanie Taylor reports



The Thomas Gainsborough Garden by Frederic Whyte at RHS Sandringham 2026 Credit RHS/Neil Hepworth

"Gardening is the art that uses flowers and plants as paint, and the soil and sky as canvas," noted American garden writer Elizabeth Murray. Now, Chelsea Gold



Medal-winning designer Frederic Whyte has created a living canvas with The Thomas Gainsborough Garden at the inaugural RHS Sandringham Flower Show.



Freddy is a seasoned show garden builder, having created three at Hampton Court and four at RHS Chelsea, including a 2013 Gold Medal winner.

This Gainsborough-inspired concept has been on Freddy's drawing

board for many years, and with the tercentenary of Gainsborough's birth next year, the Sandringham show couldn't be timelier.



Creating a stylised Suffolk landscape, Freddy's garden echoes the rich hues, tones and textures of Gainsborough's most famous paintings and draws inspiration from the Gainsborough House museum in Sudbury.

The colour of the rear walls and the Artist's

Garden Studio (kindly loaned by Malvern Garden Buildings) the fastigate yew trees and a white mulberry tree, (*Morus alba*) representing the iconic 400-year-old mulberry tree all correlate to the museum's garden. "I love conceptual show gardens, but they must be relatable," explains Freddy. "When the public goes to a show they need to be able to take something home - an idea or an inspiration."

Famed for his society portraits, but later tiring of those commercial commissions, Gainsborough once wrote how he yearned to “walk off to some sweet village where I can paint Landskips.” It’s perhaps not surprising then, that Gainsborough habitually painted his sitters in romantic, dramatic woodland backdrops leaning against features such as chestnut paling fences and urns which Freddy has referenced in his design. It also includes a pool to reflect the vast East Anglian skies which so often captured Gainsborough’s imagination.



“I very much wanted to recreate Gainsborough’s gnarly trees,” says Freddy, “his stylised Suffolk fields and hedgerows like those in the portrait of Mr and Mrs Andrews (circa 1750) informed my design vision.

I’ve planted a native hedgerow and a copse of native trees with field maple (*Acer campestre*),

hawthorn (*Crataegus monogyna*) and silver birch (*Betula pendula*), very reminiscent of Gainsborough’s woodland vistas. The different colour combinations of the cottage-garden planting in the four sections of the quadrant were inspired by the colours and textures of the Sudbury-woven silks in Gainsborough’s paintings.”



Freddy describes the 285sqm show garden as ‘rose and dahlia intense’ with around 100 David Austin roses. “I’ve gone for Silas Marner, Lady of Shalott, The Country Parson, Eustacia Vye,” says Freddy, “they all have those soft pastel colours which really lend themselves to the garden.

I've also used more open roses like Tottering by Gently and Scarborough Fair in the wilder, woodland areas." Freddy selected dahlias from Tony Calver's nursery, Dahlia Addiction in Norfolk. "Dahlias offer different colourways, combinations and forms," he says, "but their growing conditions are also similar to that of roses, so they work well and inject colour into the scheme."



Without a major sponsor, Freddy's garden has only been made possible thanks to the hard work and generosity of his suppliers and long-standing clients. "I'm very lucky to be working with David of D Taylor Landscapes with whom I have had the privilege of working for over a decade.

He's very kindly taking three weeks out of his schedule to build the garden. Ca'Pietra Artisans are supplying our stone, while Phil and Terri at Practical Plants, went above and beyond to source our major plants so I've been very fortunate," he says. As part of the Gainsborough House connection, Norfolk artist Kate Giles will showcase her powerful and expressive East Anglian landscapes in the studio and will join the team on press day.



Freddy wants visitors to his Sandringham garden to take away creative planting combinations and to understand that you can contrast the naturalistic style with the more formal.

"Gardens can be structured and stylised," he says, "for me, gardens are works of creative



endeavour. All gardens are cultivated. They are, or should be, a work of art. I want people to reject the messy 'wild' garden trend and unashamedly revive 'old-fashioned' roses and dahlias."

Splitting his time between Suffolk and Italy, Freddy infuses his English gardens with Italianate influences – formal layouts, fastigate trees, evergreen structure, reasonably paired back planting schemes and water features like ponds, fountains and spouts. Freddy is inspired by the classic Italian 'il selvaggio' or French 'bosquet' wilder, woodland areas. "I love that play of light

and shade," he says, "creating areas that are soaked in sunshine and then slightly more mysterious, shadier spots, that invite people to explore what lies within."



Post-show, thanks to his network of generous suppliers and clients, much of Freddy's garden is finding a permanent home or returning to where it came from. And after a well-earned summer break, September will find Freddy back in southern Tuscany, pouring his creative energies into a new courtyard garden project. Having

had the privilege of stepping into Freddy's private Italian courtyard garden at his home, it's clear to me when he says, "I think my soul yearns to return to Italy fulltime." May his enduring passion continue to bring him joy.