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The Rhythm of Rainwater
Garden at RHS Sandringham
Picture: RHS / Neil Hepworth

Nature's Symphony

The innovative Rhythm of Rainwater Garden at RHS Sandringham used sound, movement and purposeful planting to communicate nature's artistry and our responsibility to protect it. Velvet's Melanie Taylor talks to the Cambridgeshire husband-and-wife design team behind it

When I meet Anthony and Jo Purdy in their Bassingbourn studio, they're excited to be building their first ever show garden – a milestone for the 10th anniversary of their design studio. Neither imagined they'd walk away with not one, but three accolades – a coveted Gold Medal, Best Grow Forward Garden and another for Best Construction in the category. They were also highly commended in the RHS Environmental Innovation Award. Sustainability and climate resilience are at the heart of Anthony and Jo's ethos for the garden, featuring both rainwater harvesting and reclaimed materials. A downpipe channels the rainwater from the artist's studio roof and flows into seven aluminium dipping tanks, a narrow rill linking two together. The soundscape evolves

organically as droplets splash onto broad-leaved plants and beat a rhythm onto steel tongue drums. Submerged hydrophones in the tanks pick up the subtlety of the sounds created beneath the surface. Their planet-friendly garden was inspired by Sounds Right, a global campaign led by the Museum of the United Nations – UNLive, and supported by charitable foundation Earth/Percent, which recognises NATURE as an original artist on streaming platforms. When musicians sample nature sounds on their tracks, the initiative collects the streaming royalties and distributes the funds to worldwide environmental conservation projects. A chance encounter at the Autumn Fair at Audley End sparked the garden's development. Anthony recalls bumping into the garden's sponsor, Andrew Cousins of The Dipping Tank Company: "It was perfect," he says, "because Andrew's

beautiful tanks definitely deserve to be showcased, but you've also got something so simple as harvesting the water to create all those delightful sounds. We'd previously met percussive artist Kiran Gandhi (aka Madame Gandhi) who used underwater hydrophones to record the cracking sounds of ice in Antarctica and sampled it in her tracks. So when you fully appreciate what musicians and artists can do with those sorts of sounds, and then you see something like Andrew's product, you realise you could do something equally magical in a garden on a smaller scale, and it all went from there. Jo and I talked about how everyone hears particular sounds that evoke vivid memories and images. Raindrops pattering on leaves, camping with the sound of rain splashing on the canvas or walking through the woods and hearing the rain on the tree canopy above." To bring this to life for visitors at the

show, celebrated British musician and soundscape artist Jason Singh (whose celebrity fans include Brian Eno and George Ezra) performed live on the garden. He used bio sonification to capture the subtle electrical signals and micro-fluctuations generated by the water, trees and plants – translating hidden rhythms from the movement of water and ions in the plant, into audible musical notes which people could listen to.

Anthony and Jo partnered with Conway Landscapes in Bishop's Stortford for the garden build, having collaborated with founder Cormac Conway since 2018 on 30 gardens. Cormac's expertise (including 22 show gardens) made taking on the Sandringham project an easy decision for the pair. "It was another of those serendipity moments," says Anthony. "I thought we can definitely do this because of his show garden experience, and the fact we have such a good relationship." Many question the sustainability of show gardens. "You have to acknowledge there really is no sustainable show garden," says Anthony, "but you have to try to offset it by doing it in the most sustainable way possible and being authentic with your messaging.

We've always been conscious of upcycling. I made the bed for our first house out of pallets, to the amusement of friends who said, 'You're surely not making your wife sleep on a pallet bed!' Stuff like that's really simple. Knowing those materials are there you might as well use them. We risk losing it today in this 'throw-away' society where it's cheaper to replace than to repair." Reused pallet wood from Thermal Engineering in Royston forms the studio framework while Ashwell's Reclaimed Timber supplied salvaged timbers from a dismantled bridge in Thetford which Anthony transformed into the oak setts for his timber paving, bench pad and steps down into the sunken area. Anthony is proud that the garden contains almost no first-life materials. "Obviously if



Jo and Anthony Purdy

the garden was bigger we'd have used the whole bridge, but we're trying to ensure everything's relatively local and materials don't have too far to travel," he says. "I think the more you become obsessed with that, the better. The Dutch barn next to our office is scheduled for demolition later this year, so we've salvaged the whole end

“ The kids were studying quietly and then one asked, ‘What’s that man doing up there?’ The teacher explained we were harvesting rainwater for the show ”

wall for tin for the artist's studio. The barn's brackets have been forged into nails," he says. "How cool that the nails holding the corrugated sheets onto the studio, are basically the ones that would have been holding onto the structure all its life." All of the rainwater for the garden was harvested from a school in King's Lynn and stored at the sawmill on the Sandringham Estate, so it only travelled 12 miles to the show. "There was this beautiful moment when I was fixing the tank in place," says Anthony. "The kids were studying quietly

and then one asked, 'What's that man doing up there?' The teacher explained we were harvesting rainwater for the show. It was a waterwise lesson those kids wouldn't have had without our massive tank in their playground."

The show garden plants were grown by Palmstead Nurseries, Creepers, Form Plants, Anglo Aquatic Plant Company and Deepdale Trees all famed for their sustainable credentials. The couple and their studio team also grew some on themselves including Cambridge strawberries, an architectural *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex', *Soleirolia soleirolia*, commonly known as Baby's Tears, and *Alchemilla mollis*, which holds droplets like sparkling diamonds in its leaves.

Anthony and Jo chose plants with other virtues besides their aesthetic value to the garden. The large leaves of *Hosta* 'Sum and Substance' and *Fatsia japonica* perfectly amplified the pitter-patter of rainfall. The rounded form of *Pittosporum tobira* 'Nanum' brought structure whilst the carnivorous aquatic plant *Utricularia bisquamata* kept the tanks midge-free.

The studio houseplants were donated by Bury Lane near Royston where Anthony got his first job aged 14. The studio doors and windows were all unsaleable stock from Crittall Windows, the pergola was from Adezz and LandscapePlus did the pumps and lighting. House of Hackney fitted out the studio's interior whilst Zion

Landscapes, based in Burwell, built the relaxation space adjacent to the garden that was furnished by Torc Pots and Elements Outdoor Living, with audio by Javalin.

Speaking after the show, Jo says: "We're beyond thrilled that our first show garden was such a success. The Gold Medal and category awards are testament not only to our design brief but the sheer hard work and support of so many people. A huge thanks to our studio and build teams who worked tirelessly in unbearable heat and to our collaborators and craftspeople, Earth/Percent, nurseries, suppliers, the school and our family who have been behind us every step of the way. Special thanks to Jason Singh, whose live garden set truly brought the 'nature as composer' concept to life."

Post-show, the main landscape elements and the dipping tanks will relocate to a courtyard garden for a new vinyl bar, Parlecoot, opening in Eddington in the autumn, closing the circle between the garden and musical soundscapes once more.

See anthonypurdy.co.uk for more.

For help designing your own garden, contact Melanie by emailing melanie.taylor@hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk or visiting hazelwoodplantscapes.co.uk



The team take a well-deserved break
Image: Jo and Anthony Purdy