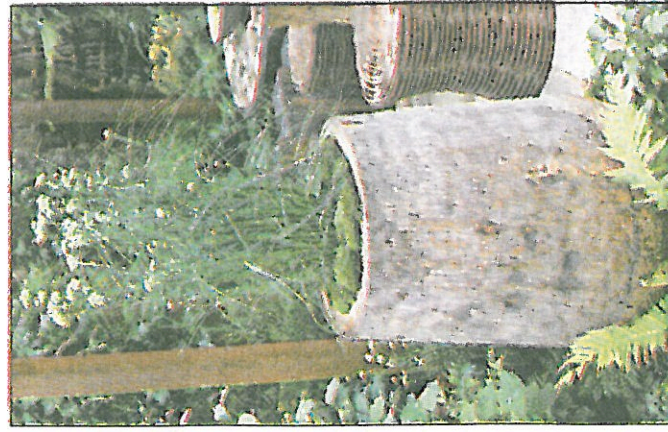


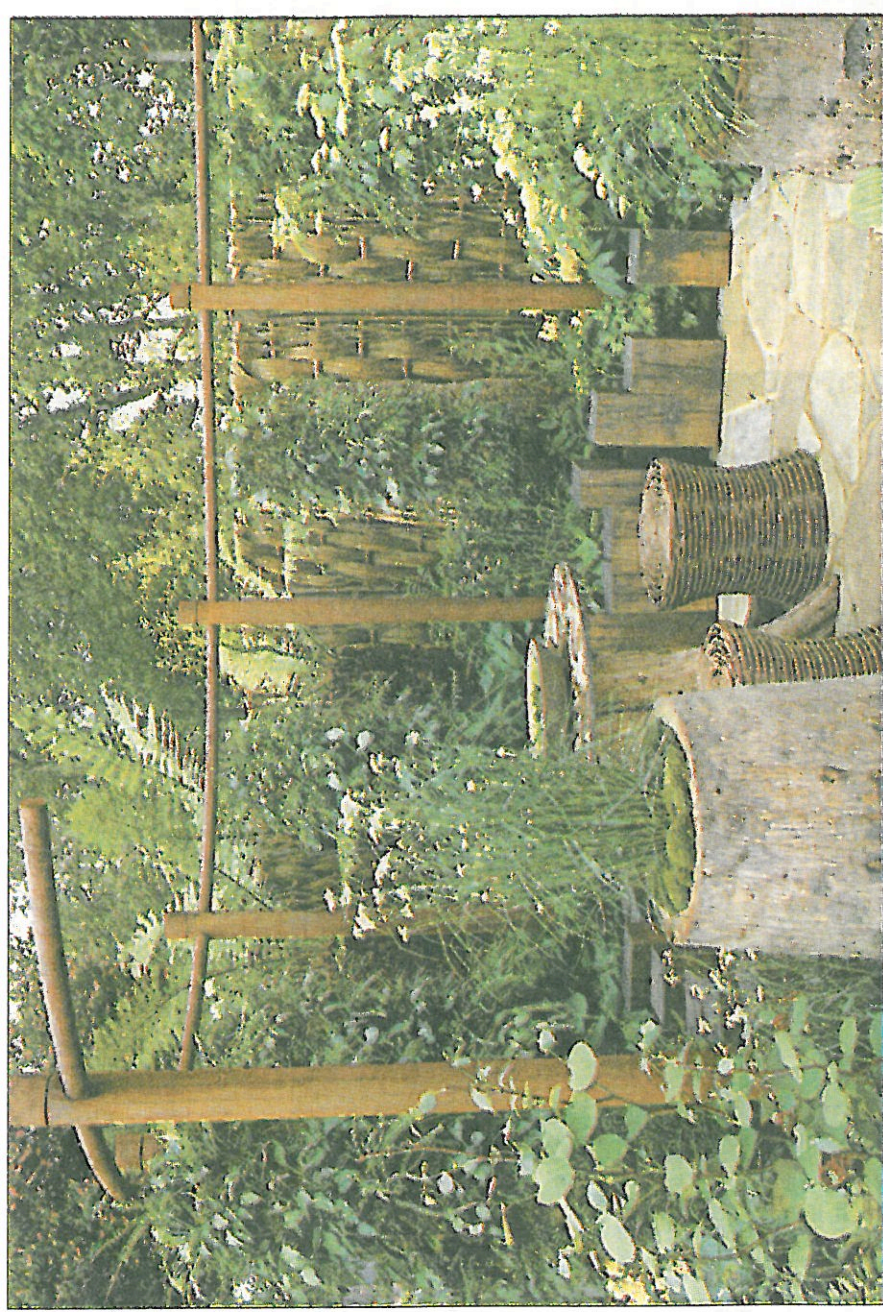


Left: Containers made from toddy palms, and planted with sedge Luzula nivea, stand at the garden's entrance

Right: a rusty pergola that follows the garden's curve is hung with vertical bolsters of ferns, ivies, clover and hostas

Pictures by
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Caspar Gabb took inspiration from the shady spaces of Antipodean rainforests to win Best City Garden at Chelsea. **Pattie Barron** meets him



Dark knight of the soil

THE month of June is when the English garden is at its colourful, ebullient peak. But every plot has its shady side, which is less accommodating to summer's vibrant flowers. How can you turn this tricky, hard-to-plant corner into an asset? By making it a green, calming retreat that delights the senses not just in high summer, but right through the year.

This is the thinking behind the subtle and beautifully planted The Green Room, the garden that won first-time exhibitor, landscape designer Caspar Gabb, a coveted gold medal and Best City Garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show. Although many of the show gardens are not practical enough to be reproduced, this one, measuring 4.5m by 5m, could be placed in any London plot to serve as a shady refuge at the far end of the garden, or as a densely planted patio that receives less sun than most.

"It is a small, shady space that is meant to represent a clearing in the subtropical forests of, say, Australia or New Zealand," says Gabb. "Despite the exotic choice of location, the plants — ferns including English woodlanders and Australian tree ferns, hostas, grasses, shrubs and perennials — are hardy, and would even grow in Scotland. The idea was to create a tapestry of textures, all in shades of green. And I wanted to evoke the feeling of tranquillity that you encounter in a forest or woodland."

What hits the eye — or your head, if you're not careful — are five luxuriant, leafy bolsters that hang at intervals from a rusty steel pergola that follows the garden's curve. "I love vertical planting," says Gabb. "It is a great way to make the most of a



Chelsea newcomer Caspar Gabb won gold for his all-green garden

limited space, and it also means that people have something to see at eye level, which is important in a back garden as well as a show garden.

"The foliage cages are my take on hanging baskets, and they are stuffed with ferns, hostas, ivies, creeping purple clover, mind-your-own-business and moss. The hard part is planting, which you do from the outside in, through holes in the lining of capillary matting." A central reservoir in each cage holds water that seeps out to the plants. "I haven't used young plants that

will grow out of proportion to the cages, but mini versions of plants that will stay small," explains Gabb. "For instance, everybody knows how huge gunnera grows, but there is also a tiny, creeping version, *Gunnera magellanica*, that I've used, so you get a similar effect on a smaller scale. And, as gunnera likes moist conditions, I've planted it at the bottom of the cage, so it receives the maximum amount of water."

The boundary Gabb chose is willow and split hazel fencing, but what sets it apart is the fact that the hurdles are vertically woven. "They needed to be woven vertically to suggest the panorama you see in any forest, right into the distance: masses of tree trunks."

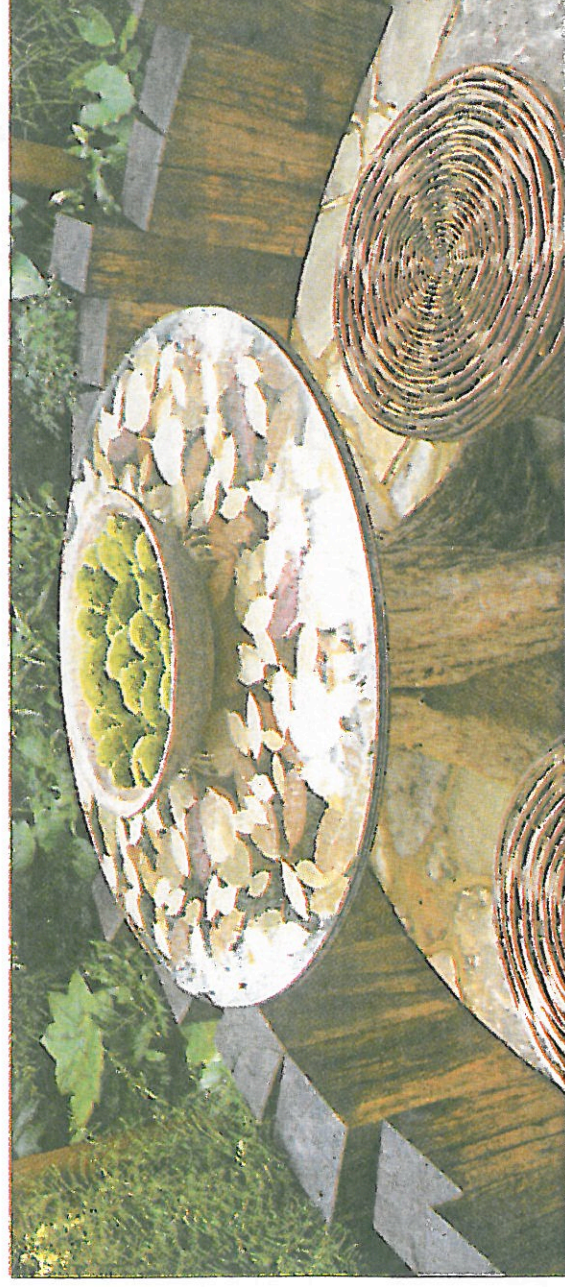
The wooden blocks of irregular sizes that contain the plants around the perimeter are made of seasoned oak reclaimed from a dismantled bridge in Matlock, Derbyshire, and serve as impromptu seating. But the real landscape talking point is the crazy paving Gabb used to simulate the forest floor. Crazy paving surely hasn't been seen at Chelsea for at least 40 years, Gabb is unrepentant. "I wanted to recreate the cracks and textures of the earth; when the ground dries out, you get these wonderful irregular textures." Good news for those of us with clay soil whose lawns this summer will develop a similar look.

In keeping with the feel of a primitive forest, what look like wooden stags stand here and there among the plants, their presence greatly adding to the atmosphere. "They have a wonderful surface texture that looks as if they've been eaten by termites," says Gabb. "They're the equivalent of ancestors of the forest, trees that have rotted." In fact, these pinnacles are the remains of trees that have rotted over the years in deep flooded valleys of South America, and instead of being eaten by jungle life, they have been eaten by marine life: mussels.

Where many green gardens might have box balls in Versailles tubs on either side of the entrance, this space has something of earthier: chunky artisan planters made from the trunks of Burmese toddy palms. They each hold the prettiest white-flow-ered sedge, *Luzula nivea*, which is mulched with a layer of vel-very green moss. And on a table made from a tree trunk topped with glass that displays leaf skeletons, is a bowl of tactile moss cushions, which is the designer's way of bringing the lush green planting that wraps around the garden, right into its heart.

How to get the look

- To commission a similar green garden, or order planted hanging cages and toddy palm containers, contact Caspar Gabb (020 8960 9492; www.naturalelementsdesign.co.uk).
- Reclaimed seasoned oak blocks from Indigo Furniture (01629 581800; www.indigofurniture.co.uk).
- Woven willow hurdles from Natural Fencing (01234 714240; www.naturalfencing.com).
- Pinnacles from Rainforest Relics (01708 343783; www.rainforestrelics.co.uk).
- Pergola from Winstanley Metal (020 8874 9043; www.winstanleymetal0catch.com).



Leaf skeletons decorate the garden table, on which sits a bowl of velvety moss cushions