



Gold-medal-winning Caspar Gabb takes a well deserved rest during a hectic Chelsea Flower Show.

# Gardeners go to town

By Shirley Tart

It has been a golden few weeks for Shropshire's Caspar Gabb since he became our top man at Chelsea. Winning a prestigious gold medal at his first attempt was beyond Caspar's wildest dreams. And apart from having the Queen and other royals at the world famous show, Caspar was thrilled at a personal visit to his 'small city garden' from that huge favourite, Alan Titchmarsh.

"He seemed impressed and generally, reaction has been very good," says the new gold medallist. The icing on the cake for Caspar was the end-of-show news that he had also won the award for the most relaxing garden of the year.

And who is surprised? This might be his first

Chelsea garden, but Caspar's Natural Elements company has designed plots for the likes of Robbie Williams and Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber. So the big show time was just waiting to happen with his eye-catching Green Room design. Though he is based in London, Caspar's family lives near Bridgnorth and he has designed gardens in the county as well as his own cottage garden in Shropshire.

The delighted winner says: "A gold medal is a bit like winning an Oscar; it will last for the rest of my career. There are thousands of landscape gardeners but not many get a gold at Chelsea."

He is busy with a new London project at the moment, has ongoing work in the gardens of a South African building project, and country commitments including his own Shropshire cottage. He has been asked to write a column

for the *Sunday Times*.

Just to show that you can never predict what will catch the public imagination, dozens of Chelsea visitors wanted to buy the amazing 'tower' hanging baskets Caspar created for the show. "I never thought of them to sell and have no idea what they would cost, except that they must have taken me so many hours to make that they'd be priced out of the market."

Alan Titchmarsh proved a massive hit with our Shropshire exhibitors generally – especially at Ruckley Flowers near Shifnal. They were always going to be a first – the very first company to stage artificial flowers at the premier London show.

Julie and Ken Bates from Ruckley welcomed royalty as well, with Princess Alexandra taking time out to divert to the Ruckley stand. The



Christo and Kate McKinnon (above) were delighted with their Certificate of Merit. Left: Kate's stylish water rill system. Right: Darcey Bussell visited the David Austin Roses stand.

royal favourite had enjoyed a private preview at Ruckley when she spent the weekend in Shropshire with her lady-in-waiting Meriel Afia.

Julie and Ken were thrilled with the attention from gardener Alan who returned several times, did a special TV focus on them and went away with a bunch of amazing peonies for his wife. Ken says: "The response was unbelievable. We were almost besieged and had to send for more stuff overnight and set up at 5am each day."

Meanwhile, local companies with a prize-winning pedigree, Claire Austin Hardy Plants and David Austin Roses, both brought silver gilt home to the county. At David Austin the logistics are awesome, and as usual they grew 700-800 blooms for Chelsea, before choosing the 500 best. They even did a complete mock-up of the stand before leaving Albrighton, and wrapped each potted rose in brown paper for the journey.

Christo and Kate McKinnon, owners of Wilstone House and Garden near Church Stretton, took a Certificate of Merit. They too had been many months in the planning to create a

**"A gold medal is a bit like winning an Oscar; it will last for the rest of my career. There are thousands of landscape gardeners but not many get a gold at Chelsea."**

stand that would wow the judges. Christo says: "It was hard work setting everything up in the pouring rain before the opening, but it was all worth it!"

Not only did the stand look fantastic but they were all delighted with the response from the public – and, of course, exceptionally happy with their award.

They also drew a good deal of visitor attention, with strong interest in their hand-carved sandstone range. And they sold out of wrought-iron gates during the first morning. The stand also included a unique water rill system designed by Kate, hand carved in limestone.

Kate says: "It took us several years to design the system and we are so pleased to have been able to show it at Chelsea first."

Success at the prestigious show is not new to the couple: Wilstone House and Gardens also took a Certificate of Merit in 2004.

Without even trying, one Shrewsbury company which has nothing at all to do with flowers and plants made the front page of *The Times* thanks to a picture of a plastic cup held over a tulip. But this was no ordinary cup – it came from Express Cafés (P & C Morris Catering Group Ltd) who have been catering at Chelsea for the past six years.

And Rachel Watson of the north Shropshire-based RLH Public Relations was looking after one of her more unusual clients – a six-and-a-half foot slug! It belonged to Tim Penrose, who runs a West Devon hosta nursery, and was used to promote his new *Slugbusters* booklet after the slug emerged as number one pest in a recent Royal Horticultural Society top ten of pest enquiries for 2005.

Tim confessed that he had chased the made-up monster around the Chelsea show as a publicity stunt to promote the book and it worked... as a result he did numerous TV and radio interviews and sold hundreds of books.