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The Charleston garden comes to the RHS

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Southern greenery: the Charleston Garden will be at Hampton Court Palace in July

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This year at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show, there will be a special USA show garden inspired by the Texan city of Austin, Charleston, in South Carolina, and the state of Oregon. Here, Sarah Edworthy talks to horticulturalist Tom Johnson of Charleston's The Magnolia Plantation - home to the oldest public gardens in America - about his inspiration for the project...

Spanish Moss draped languorously from overhead branches. The arc of a pretty white wooden bridge reflected in still water. Tranquil walkways curving through an abundant sweep of azaleas and camellias in vibrant bloom...

The Magnolia Plantation - home to the oldest public gardens in America, situated along the Ashley River in Charleston, South Carolina - showcases a timeless vision of a romantic garden seeped in Southern charm.

'I never cared for a garden that looked like little tin soldiers' says Tom

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...the first called for a garden that looked like nature in person,' says Tom Johnson, the horticulturalist who oversees the largest and oldest collection of camellias in the United States. 'To me, a romantic garden is man's attempt in recreating Eden – a place where man, God and nature are in harmony. Man doesn't control nature, he simply designs himself as a part of it. More than anything, I enjoy how a garden touches my mind and inner soul.'

Charleston enjoys a long and rich horticultural heritage. The Magnolia Plantation was founded in 1676 by the Drayton family. Its garden, created in the 1830s by the Reverend John Drayton, was influenced by the Romantic Movement sweeping across Europe. Today, still under the ownership of the same family, it revels in year-round blooms from various varieties of flowers.

Four miles up the road lies Middleton Place, another majestic plantation property that is hailed as America's oldest landscaped garden, designed in the grand classic style of the early 18th century according to the principles of Andre Le Notre, the landscape architect celebrated for his work in order, geometry and balance at Versailles.

“A sense of history of emotion must come through. That's the important part of the Charleston garden”

'We're lucky to have both garden styles side by side,' says Johnson, adding that historic records reveal Charleston to be the premier horticultural society in American in the early 1800s. 'A lot of the smaller gardens downtown have been cared for beautifully through the years and they date back to those times.'

And here's the thing that makes this welcoming coastal city such heaven for garden lovers. People may be drawn to Charleston for the historic plantation tours, but when they go on a walking tour of the city's downtown district, they discover the so-called 'secret gardens': small, intimate courtyards created as private sanctuaries behind elegant domestic houses.

These little pocket gardens typically feature high walls for privacy, a small area of lawn with clipped box hedging and topiary, a water feature, wrought-iron railings and a bench for two. Thanks to the climate, they are planted with lush greenery and sub-tropical plants from the Caribbean. All this is attractively realised in The Charleston Garden at the Hampton Court Palace Flower Show. Designed by Sadie May Stowell to give visitors exactly that magical feeling of walking down a street and coming across a hidden garden, the bespoke garden in alluring in its mix of formal and informal elements, and in its heady scents.

'It's your own private hidden garden where you can invite your intimate guests and share with them your small part of the world,' says Johnson, who helped inform the design. 'A garden should wrap its arms around you, hold you close so you forget everything outside that garden. It should be God's way of saying, "Everything's going to be all right." That's what you strive for. You don't want someone sitting in your beautiful garden trying to conduct a business deal. You want an escape, to lure you back to connect with nature.'

Look at Stowell's design and you see not only formality in the shape and in the emphasis on natural light and shadow play, but also rampancy in flowers such as the headily fragrant trachelospermum or Carolina Jasmine, gardenias and rhododendrum viscosum or native

swamp azalea which fills the air with a wonderful spicy scent.

'The mix of control and rampancy reminds me of early Charleston,' says Johnson. 'We are such a young country, the last thing that most gardeners who came to America wanted to do was to cooperate with nature. They wanted to whip it back. You see our history in the gardens.'

What are the top tips to capture the essence of Charleston in your own garden?

'Remember it's your personal space. Take what you like and personalise it,' says Johnson. 'Create intimate areas so you feel secluded within the garden itself. And add a quirk to make it yours. It could be a rock walk that has an arrow head in it, which only one person in a hundred notices. No matter what plant material you use, a sense of history of emotion must come through. That's the important part of the Charleston garden.'



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