

Tom and Harrison Giddens at the Chelsea Flower Show.

BRITAIN IN BLOOM

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELIZABETH HARRELL



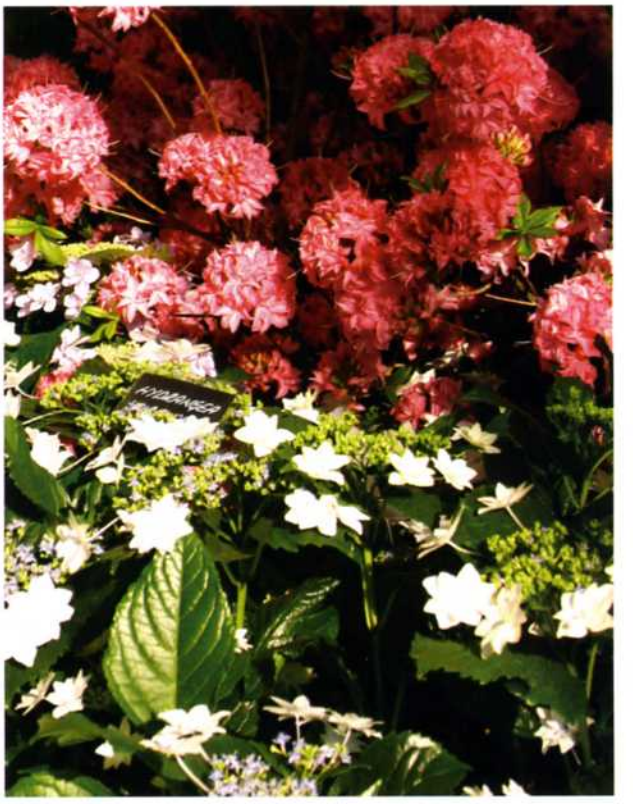
"THIS SHOW IS THE GRANDDADDY OF 'EM ALL. NOBODY DOES GARDENING LIKE THE BRITISH."

When Harrison Giddens meanders through the Technicolor wonderland of London's annual Chelsea Flower Show, she's like a painter in the halls of a great museum — immersing herself in the visions held by fellow artists, studying and learning, drawing inspiration and filling her soul.

Giddens, a Tampa floral artist, and husband Tom arrive in London after a journey that recalls an era when taking the time to travel in style took precedence over finding the fastest route with the fewest stops. A leisurely six-day voyage aboard the *Queen Mary 2*, followed by a three-hour excursion on the Orient Express, brings them to their destination where they join thousands of international gardening aficionados.

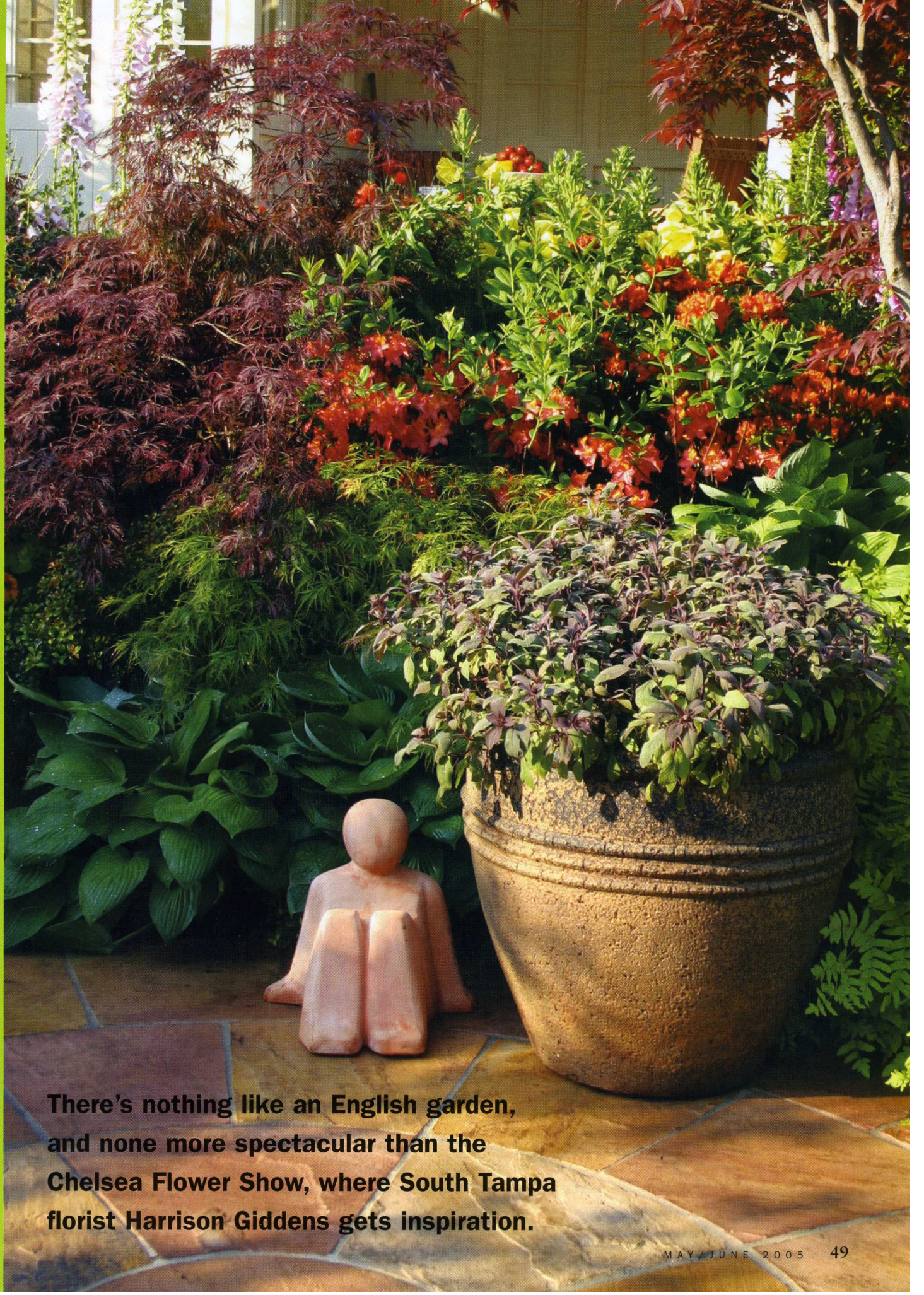
Each May, the 142-year-old flower show blankets 11 acres on the manicured south grounds and Ranelagh Gardens of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, a residence for retired pensioners. Against a backdrop of 17th-century buildings designed by Sir Christopher Wren, the grounds form a parklike oasis along the Thames River, a verdant natural showcase for more than 150 gardens and exhibits from as far away as Kenya, Japan, Jamaica and Australia.

Although commoners wouldn't dream of getting a peek at the show before Queen Elizabeth takes her private stroll through the gardens, the couple's status as Royal Horticultural Society members allows them access one day after the royal family and two days ahead of the general public.



Giddens' informal Alabama lilt infuses her enthusiasm for all things flower-related, and the Chelsea Flower Show in particular. "This show is the granddaddy of 'em all. *Nobody* does gardening like the British."

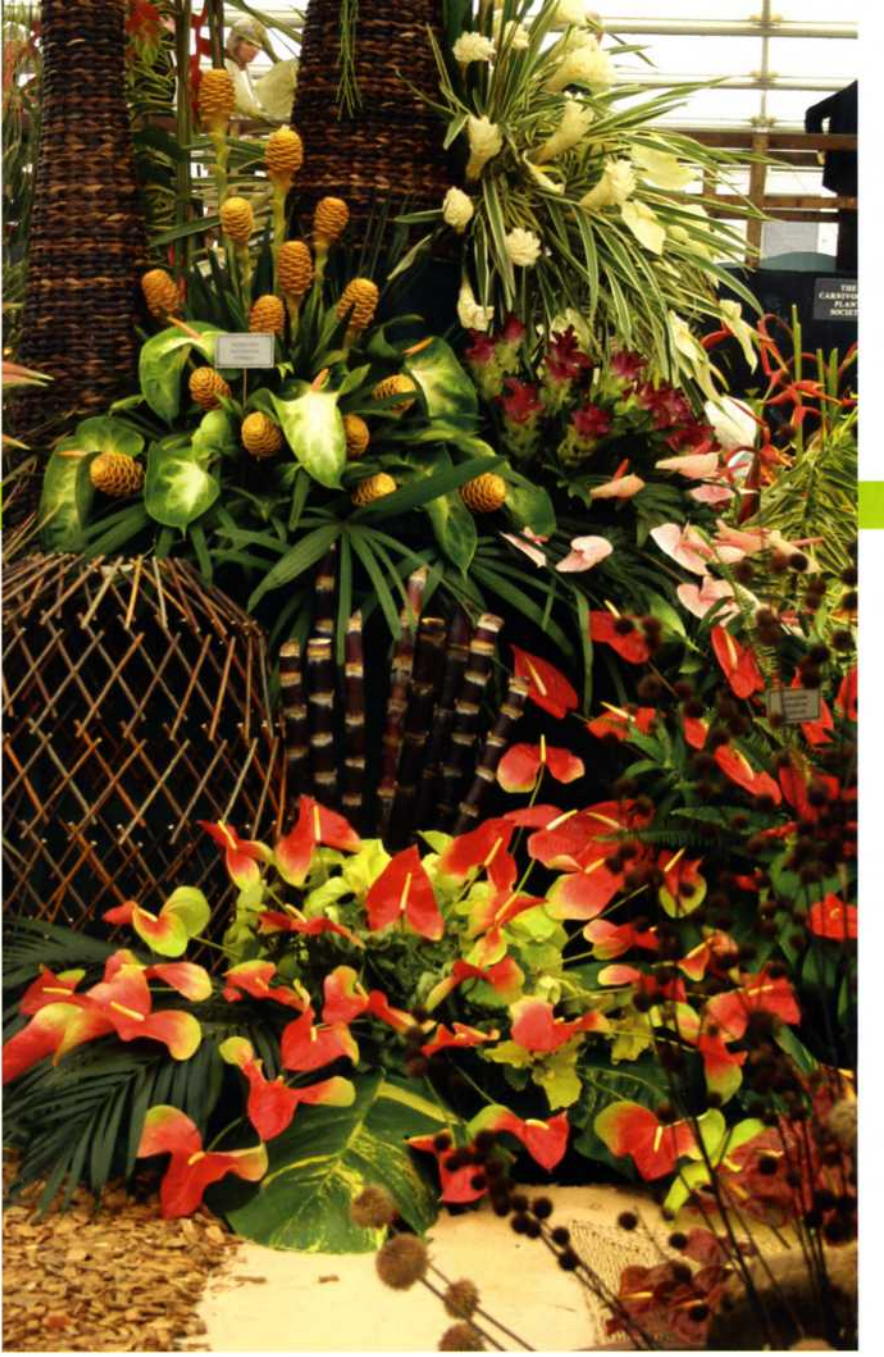
Arriving on a sunny May morning with no need for an



There's nothing like an English garden, and none more spectacular than the Chelsea Flower Show, where South Tampa florist Harrison Giddens gets inspiration.

"THE AMEN OF NATURE IS ALWAYS A FLOWER."

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES



umbrella or coat, the Giddenses head first to the corporate-sponsored, competitive show gardens. This impressive array of outdoor sites features themes ranging from the mystical, medicinal properties of plants to wildlife-friendly biodiversity.

Attentive to the way in which designers evoke their visions through materials, placement and design, Giddens is particularly struck by two gardens as different in execution as they are in subject matter.

The Stonemarket garden celebrates the 175th anniversary of The Boat Race between Oxford and Cambridge universities. Commemorating the "Battle of the Blues," the display features serene drifts of all-blue plantings; sculptured hedges and wooden arches that represent the architecture of the universities; and an open "victory space" with benches and stands of crossed, raised oars.

The Cancer Research UK Life Garden evokes the heightened appreciation of life and the beauty of nature that cancer patients and survivors often share. A shaded seating area on a pebbled walkway provides a tranquil vantage point for viewing a polished, steel arch that reflects a high-energy palette of red, orange and yellow perennials as it carries a ribbon of water into a small reflecting pool.

After a long morning of soaking in the sights, the Giddenses are two of many show-goers who enjoy a stylish midday respite — toasting the occasion with glasses of champagne to accompany an al fresco luncheon on the lawn surrounding a small bandstand. Veterans from the Royal Hospital, resplendent in their crisp red and blue uniforms, fill the air with triumphant marches, providing a lively soundtrack of British military tradition.

Moving on to the expansive indoor Pavilion, Giddens views Garden Circle flower exhibits through multiple lenses, assessing the creators' technique and process as well as their final arrangements. "I love the texture of it," she says of one dramatic display featuring lilies, glossy anthuriums and spiky birds of paradise.

"The grapevine running loosely from place to place, the tropicals, the different grasses ..." Giddens says, "it's just a great combination of texture and material."

A multilevel, Zenlike flower and vegetable montage ranks as her favorite and will provide the seed of inspiration for her presentation at Garden Week in Highlands, N.C., later in the year. The lush arrangement of lilies, ferns and vegetables hangs suspended over metal grates filled with symmetrical rows of vegetables and set into a bed of pale, gray stones. Giddens will put her own twist on the idea by incorporating orange and yellow peppers between wagon-wheel spokes with orange and yellow roses.





"CREATING AN ARRANGEMENT IS NO DIFFERENT THAN PAINTING. AN EMPTY VASE IS JUST THE SAME AS AN EMPTY CANVAS."

Giddens' artistic roots stem from childhood, when she began painting in oils and pastels at the age of 10. "I'm really inspired by color. Creating an arrangement is no different than painting. An empty vase is just the same as an empty canvas," she says. The owner of Floral Impressions on El Prado Boulevard in South Tampa for 25 years, Giddens' work with individual and corporate clients illustrates an ability and willingness to soar beyond the traditional, tried and true. Her enthusiasm shines through as she explains combining purple and chartreuse by using iris, green orchids, green apples and cut kiwi. "I love unusual color combinations, and I just love it when a person walks in and says, 'I never would have thought of that.' "

Her artistic process is deceptively simple, with no apparent creative angst. "After I meet with a client, I'm usually just quiet for a couple of days. I process things to the point where I can visualize what the end product will be. My other designers call it 'spacing out,' but I tell them I'm just workin' it!" she says with her hallmark twinkle.

She emphasizes the importance of active listening, and says she sometimes can base an entire party on something a client doesn't even know they've said. When one woman mentioned her plan to use pieces of her family silver, Giddens incorporated large, silver flower containers that complemented and blended with what the client owned. "It's much more about creating the ambiance or the 'big picture,' and not about any individual flower or container."

Giddens sees potential for her art everywhere she looks, and Tom is a supportive partner in her quest for ideas, whether he's photographing a hotel flower arrangement that piques her interest or jumping out of the car to retrieve coconuts or cattails that catch her eye.

"He always says, 'What are you going to do with that?' I just say, 'I'm gonna *use* it.' " she quips.

"She sees a lot more than I do," Tom says with his usual quiet smile.

Whether she is collecting ideas on the other side of the globe or discovering her muse much closer to home, Giddens continues to enhance the Tampa Bay canvas, one vision, one brushstroke, one blossom at a time. Finding new ways to carry the beauty of nature into bedrooms and boardrooms is a commitment that Giddens fulfills with dedication and delight.

"We are so intertwined with nature, and I think the beauty of watching a bud open and change is the metamorphosis that grounds us," Giddens says. "It's God's beauty and God's gift to us." ❑