

Press release

National Trust, Blue Diamond and Ann-Marie Powell join forces to celebrate 'gardens for all' at 2024 RHS Chelsea Flower Show

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3D visual of The Octavia Hill Garden by Blue Diamond with the National Trust | © Ann-Marie Powell Gardens

The National Trust and Blue Diamond Garden Centres are delighted to be working with multi-award-winning garden design practice Ann-Marie Powell Gardens to create a prestigious show garden for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2024.

The Octavia Hill Garden by Blue Diamond with the National Trust will celebrate pioneering social reformer Octavia Hill (1838-1912), a founder of the National Trust, who believed that 'the healthy gift of air and the joy of plants and flowers' were vital in everyone's life.

Octavia worked tirelessly to improve urban housing and protect green space, yet today, one in three people in Britain still don't have access to nearby nature-rich spaces. While celebrating Octavia's legacy, the garden also aims to inspire people to create innovative gardens that connect people with the beauty and complexity of the natural world.

The National Trust, Blue Diamond and Ann-Marie Powell Gardens share the belief that gardens can and should be for all, and that they have the power to transform lives. This is reflected in the garden's design as an urban community wildlife garden set on a brownfield site. The beautiful, plant-filled garden has been created with wellbeing, biodiversity, sustainability and accessibility firmly in mind.

Designed by Ann-Marie Powell with the Blue Diamond team, the garden has a relaxed feel and natural planting style. It is laid out as a series of 'outdoor sitting rooms' – a core idea from Octavia Hill – where each individual garden compartment has its own atmosphere. Visitors are invited to feel they are part of nature, a fundamental need as important today as in Octavia Hill's lifetime.

Dividing the space in this way echoes the 'winding ways' that Octavia often referred to, offering the opportunity to wander, both physically and emotionally.

Ann-Marie Powell said: "Research proves that access to public green space improves so many outcomes: educational; physical, mental and social; resilience and recovery. Providing green space isn't a niche idea; it was, and still is, crucial to our health and happiness."

The garden features some 3,600 native and non-native plants working together for biodiversity and beauty. Bold, pollinator-attracting planting throughout the garden is set to appeal to wildlife and visitors alike. For example, *Celtis sinensis*, a climate resilient tree very tolerant of air pollution, provides nectar for pollinators, butterflies and bees through its green flowers, while its orange autumn berries are a food source for birds and mammals. *Clematis vitalba* brings attractive creamy flowers to the garden, while also providing food and even nesting material for a range of pollinators and small mammals.

Paths through the garden lead to a garden building designed by architect Giles Jollands with Sam Ogilvie which can be used for shelter, social gatherings and events, while still allowing interaction with nature. Habitat has been incorporated into the building with thatch walls and a planted canopy providing nectar for pollinators, while an upper-level wildlife observation platform allows people views of the sky and surrounding tree canopies from a new, raised perspective.

A wildlife pond sits at one end of the garden, edged with aquatic plants to provide maximum habitat value. A pond dipping platform and walk-through stream (which helps to mask traffic noise) encourage curiosity, exploration and adventure.

The garden is designed to be as accessible as possible, thinking about those with sensory loss and special access needs. Sloping paths are all wheelchair accessible and include wheelchair passing spaces.

The garden includes an installation by sound artist Justin Wiggan which records the electrical impulses of the plants, the earth beneath our feet, and the colours within blooms, wind and water. This will enhance connections with the garden and provide alternative experiences for visitors who are visually impaired or blind. Thanks to geocaching, visitors will even be able to share and 'replant' the garden's sounds, creating their own 'sound gardens' around the world.

Importantly, this beautiful garden shows what can be achieved when working to the highest environmental standards. Reclaimed brick, timber, stone and thatch, sourced from National Trust places, have been used wherever possible to give old materials new purpose, and low-carbon or carbon-locking build techniques are used throughout. All plants are peat-free and are climate-change resilient including the trees.

The garden will also help young horticulturists develop their skills. A number of National Trust garden apprentices are set to work on the garden build and planting, along with the Blue Diamond team and other skilled horticulturists from Blue Diamond Garden Centres.

Andy Jasper, the National Trust's Director of Gardens & Parklands, said: "We're so excited to have a garden at Chelsea Flower Show for the first time in a decade. What we wanted to do was ask: if Octavia Hill was alive today, what would concern her? Without a doubt, she'd want to provide access to nature for urban communities, because we believe gardens and green space have the power to transform lives in so many ways.

"We hope everyone will come away from this garden with an appreciation of Octavia Hill, what she stood for and how important she has been to the formation of the National Trust. We remain inspired by the role she played and we believe that gardens can continue to address the biodiversity crisis.

"We're proud to be working with Blue Diamond and Ann-Marie Powell Gardens to be part of one of the most sustainable, most accessible and most uplifting gardens to ever come to Chelsea Flower Show. And, of course, we hope people will be inspired to go on and visit the many historic gardens that we care for."

Jill Kerr, Group Relationship Manager for Blue Diamond, said: "Blue Diamond, along with the National Trust and Ann-Marie Powell Gardens, believe in gardens for all – for people, nature and for wildlife. Research shows that spending time outdoors, whether it be in public green spaces or your own garden, results in better physical, mental and social wellbeing.

"We had an idea for an Octavia Hill themed garden and so approached the National Trust who we were working in collaboration with, suggesting that we design a garden based upon Octavia Hill's ideals. Octavia believed that a garden should be the complement of every home and campaigned to save even the smallest neighbourhood open space as an 'outdoor sitting room' providing 'pure earth, clean air and blue sky'.

"We hope the garden will inspire and encourage people to get involved and create gardens or areas for plants to flourish, to spend time outdoors in nature and in their gardens to enjoy the many proven benefits. Blue Diamond provides everything you could need to create your own 'outdoor sitting room' and nature friendly space, including a range of plants to capture the look and feel of our RHS Chelsea Garden, at home."

Ann-Marie Powell continued: "In honour of Octavia Hill, we've created 'a place to sit in, a place to play in, a place to stroll in and a place to spend the day in'. It is a place of refuge, a place to withdraw from personal challenges and the everyday. In this space, surrounded by wildlife, your spirit can be nurtured and revived.

“The garden also shows that the parks, verges and gardens of our cities and towns present a huge opportunity to increase plant diversity and provide habitats and food for wildlife including pollinators. Many people think of biodiversity as a luxury – a nice-to-have – but it’s the engine that produces everything that we consume. When it is diminished, everything loses out.”

She concluded: “To have the opportunity to design a garden whose message I feel so passionate about at the world’s most famous flower show is a dream come true for me and the wider design team. I hope this garden educates, inspires, invigorates and puts a huge smile on the face of all that visit, and highlights the importance of green space, plants, wildlife, nature and air being a basic human right that should be accessible to all.”

After the show, the garden will be rebuilt at Blue Diamond-owned Bridgemere Show Gardens (an RHS Partner Garden) near Nantwich in Cheshire, where it can be visited year-round.

Landscape build for The Octavia Hill Garden by Blue Diamond with the National Trust is by The Landscaping Consultants, with plants supplied by Hortus Loci.