

MICHAEL BALSTON

Camilla Phelps talks to a landscape architect whose passion for plants makes him an ideal chairman of the judges at the Chelsea Flower Show. Portrait Charlie Hopkinson

IN CONVERSATION, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS DON'T ALWAYS MAKE more references to plants and gardeners than to materials and buildings. But although Michael Balston describes himself as a "maker of spaces", he is as passionate about plants as he is about the locations they are planted in. As he says, "It's hard to be a good designer of anything if you don't know your medium, and horticulture has the same importance as the materials I make walls out of."

It's therefore not surprising to learn that Balston has several horticultural lives outside his design practice. He is an

and when he subsequently set up in partnership with Arabella Lennox-Boyd, there wasn't much competition.

As for the horticultural side of the job, Balston's mother had run a market garden in the postwar era and he suspects that some of that atmosphere rubbed off on him. Later on he picked up a lot simply from wheeling his children around Kew. But like so many gardeners, he has learned through trial and error on his own plot.

The four-acre garden at Manor Farmhouse in Wiltshire has been his test bed for 24 years now – for plants and structures; but the part he loves the most

stunning but challenging location, keeping the view, but coping with the winds.

It's hard to pinpoint a signature style among his designs. "I'm not sure that I want people to know I've been there," is Balston's view. "Every garden should say something about the owner. It's not like creating a picture to be admired – a garden is a place to be lived in."

Balston has seen his profession change beyond recognition. On a positive note, the public is generally more receptive, and he's full of admiration for the new crop of designers coming through. On the downside, he sees money and lack of investment in horticulture as a problem. But this pales next to the biggest challenge of all: climate change. Perhaps controversially, Balston says that changing the plants we use is neither here nor there. He thinks the landscape architect's role will have an increasingly political focus.

"We could be in for such a huge review of what we think is important. I'm pretty pessimistic about global warming and what that's going to do and I think the landscape fraternity will be at the forefront of dealing with the consequences. I think that landscapers will be very involved in planning for whatever future we see when we have a reduced land mass."

A sobering thought. But meanwhile, Balston still has more to learn and plenty to do before he's ready to hand over the baton to the next generation. He hankers after designing a perennial garden to rival Pensthorpe, the nature centre in Norfolk with gardens designed by Piet Oudolf and Julie Toll – and, of course, like all gardeners, he'd like to spend more time in his own garden. ■

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RHS council member, chairman of the judges at the Chelsea Flower Show and garden advisor at RHS Wisley. So while modernist architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) inspired him, he says he is also very "turned on" by Dutch designer Piet Oudolf's planting and he cites his friend the late Christopher Lloyd as one of his biggest influences. He credits Christo with opening his eyes to the way plants could be used. And he wishes he could be as good a horticulturist as Jim Gardiner, curator at Wisley.

It's not quite what you might expect from someone who qualified as an architect at Cambridge University in the early 1970s. Balston didn't enjoy the more technical side of the job, so when he found himself becoming more interested in "the setting of buildings" he decided to study landscape architecture part-time. The course at Hammersmith Polytechnic was the only one in London back then

is the field he planted up with trees and bulbs when he first moved there.

"There's an incredible performance there, starting with the snowdrops – and particularly in summer, when the cow parsley is out, with *Camassia* growing through it – the scent is mind-blowing," he says. It's the spot he spends the most time in when he does get time out from his busy schedule. "The borders are interesting but I don't linger in them as much as I do in the field."

His work often takes him away from home. At 62, he is one of the UK's leading landscape architects with an international portfolio that spans designer hotels and private gardens, both modern and traditional. His design for The Grove hotel in Hertfordshire is a high-profile experiment in the layering of a modern garden over a historical one. Meanwhile a coastal garden in Dublin is a beautiful example of how to exploit a

Further information

Balston & Company, Long Barn, Patney, Devizes, Wiltshire SN10 3RB.

Tel 01380 848181, www.balston.co.uk

