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# GARDENS

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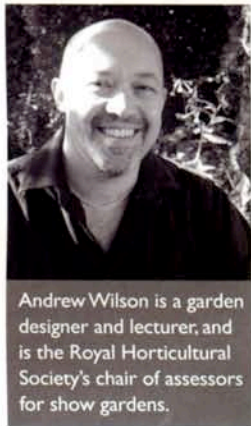
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# Passport to Sweden

Philip Nixon's modernist show garden for a Gothenburg festival impresses designer and RHS judge Andrew Wilson



Andrew Wilson is a garden designer and lecturer, and is the Royal Horticultural Society's chair of assessors for show gardens.

The Chelsea Flower Show is a glittering shop window, displaying jewel-like gardens from some of the world's best designers. It also provides those designers an unrivalled opportunity to network – which makes it a catalyst for exciting developments in the garden design world. At the 2007 show, for example, Philip Nixon met Swedish designer Ulf Nordfjell; as a result Philip exhibited in Sweden the following year as part of the Gardens for Gothenburg Festival, alongside gardens by Ulf, Piet Oudolf, Topher Delaney and Julie Toll.

Philip has used exhibition gardens to his advantage during his career, first appearing at Chelsea with Marcus Barnett in 2005 to win a gold medal and 'best in show' for a small outdoor gallery garden. The opportunity to design for the Gothenburg Festival provided a similar challenge, but with the added requirement that the garden had to look good from June to September, much longer than the few days of the Chelsea show. This demanded a different approach to planting design and more robust construction than would ever be seen at RHS shows.

## Modernist influence

Philip conceived the garden as a passageway – a route through to other places. Suitably, the garden is dominated by straight lines, which lend a sense of movement. Narrow, steel-edged channels brim with dark water, and long strips of textured gravel draw the eye. Pathways interlock and overlap, making it easy to explore. Shadow patterns play on the hornbeam hedges and walls that enclose the garden.

Philip says he's not a pure modernist, but there is a distinctly modernist flavour to his work. There's a strong contrast between the organic and the man-made, for example. With their long tradition of pioneering modernist designers, Swedes might be more familiar with this aspect of design than the British. Oddly enough, though, Philip says he discussed the garden at its opening with a British journalist who thought the garden very Swedish, >



MARIANNE MAIERUS

## MULTI-STEMMED CHERRIES

*Prunus 'Kanzan'* provides spring colour in both flower and foliage (its young leaves have a bronze blush). More importantly, the cherry stems cast constantly changing shadow on the smooth concrete wall behind. The simple ivy groundcover and linear detailing on the wall contrast well with the irregular trunks and the seasonal change in the foliage.



MOA MALMSTEN

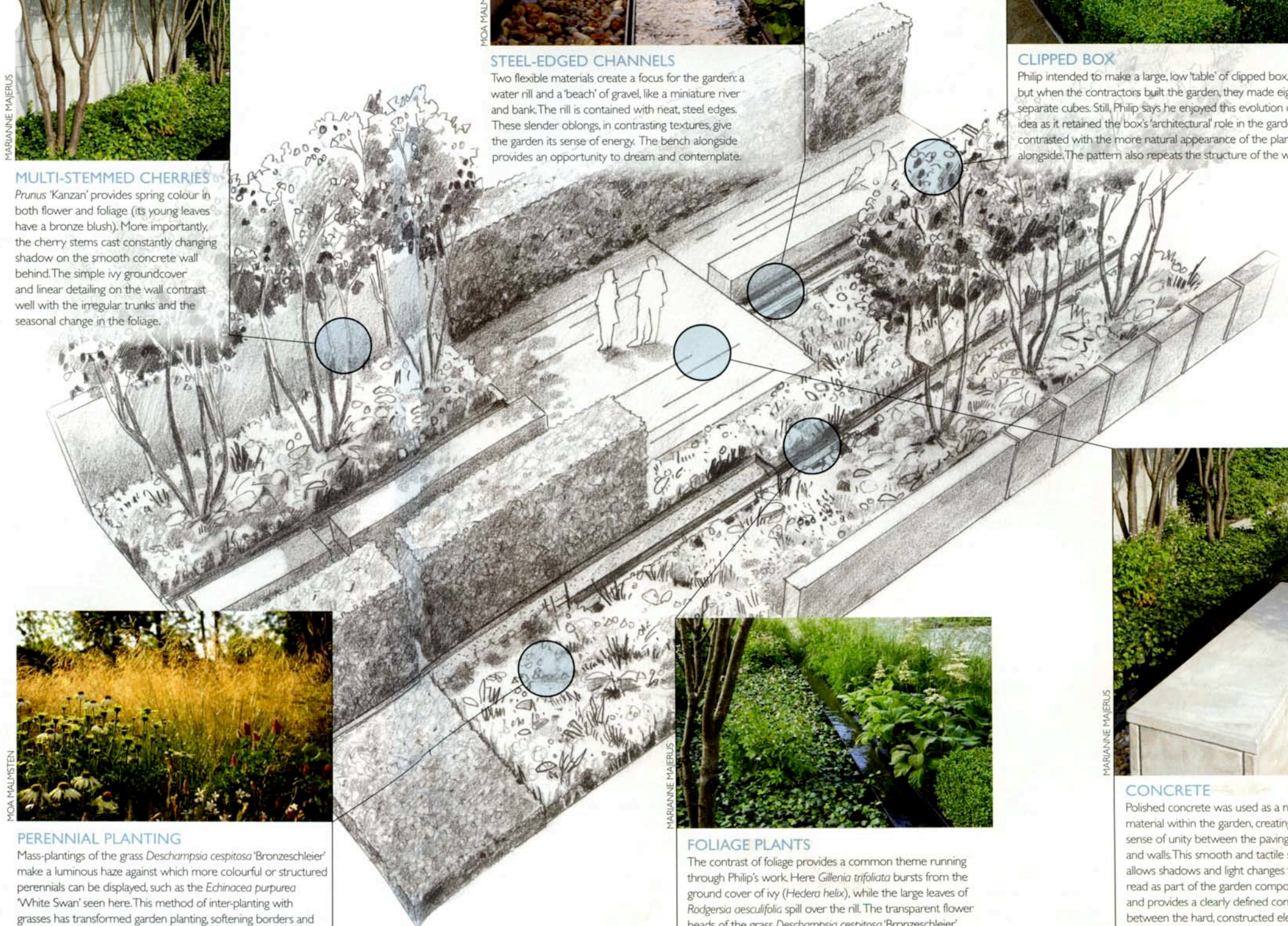
## STEEL-EDGED CHANNELS

Two flexible materials create a focus for the garden: a water rill and a 'beach' of gravel, like a miniature river and bank. The rill is contained with neat, steel edges. These slender oblongs, in contrasting textures, give the garden its sense of energy. The bench alongside provides an opportunity to dream and contemplate.



## CLIPPED BOX

Philip intended to make a large, low 'table' of clipped box, but when the contractors built the garden, they made eight separate cubes. Still, Philip says he enjoyed this evolution of his idea as it retained the box's 'architectural' role in the garden, and contrasted with the more natural appearance of the planting alongside. The pattern also repeats the structure of the walls.



MOA MALMSTEN

## PERENNIAL PLANTING

Mass-plantings of the grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Bronzeschleier' make a luminous haze against which more colourful or structured perennials can be displayed, such as the *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Swan' seen here. This method of inter-planting with grasses has transformed garden planting, softening borders and giving them a new lease of life in late summer and autumn.



MARIANNE MAIERUS

## FOLIAGE PLANTS

The contrast of foliage provides a common theme running through Philip's work. Here *Gillenia trifoliata* bursts from the ground cover of ivy (*Hedera helix*), while the large leaves of *Rodgersia aesculifolia* spill over the rill. The transparent flower heads of the grass *Deschampsia cespitosa* 'Bronzeschleier' add depth and movement to the planting.



MARIANNE MAIERUS

## CONCRETE

Polished concrete was used as a neutral material within the garden, creating a sense of unity between the paving, seats and walls. This smooth and tactile surface allows shadows and light changes to be read as part of the garden composition and provides a clearly defined contrast between the hard, constructed elements and the soft and mainly green planting.



“Philip tends to amass a range of plants and then organises them into the available space once on site”

▷ then with a Swedish journalist who thought it very British. He says: “I like to think the design would work anywhere and is a reflection of whatever was influencing me at the time.” Among those influences, he says, was modern art and design. “The straight line is the simplest of forms and I like the elegance, clarity and directness of linear design.” Alongside this purity he is also alert to the nuances of the natural landscape and enjoys the way in which these opposites interact.

Philip used a simple palette of materials in both planting and construction. The paving, walls and long benches are in polished concrete. Structural elements were pre-cast, while the paving was poured and finished in the garden. This material provides a neutral, raw, grey surface that contrasts with the natural qualities of the planting. The simple oblongs of paving also bring light into the space.

The planting was similarly pared down, with fewer than 20 kinds of plant used in the whole garden. This typifies the way in which the contemporary British planting palette has dramatically changed and moved away from the indulgent complexities of the flower garden style. The soft and naturalistic perennial planting is contained by hornbeam hedging and the structural walls. Multi-stemmed *Prunus* ‘Kanzan’ provide height and weight to the planting, breaking the lines of the walls and plain surfaces. Below perennial mixes of *Rodgersia aesculifolia* (a Nixon favourite), *Sanguisorba* ‘Tanna’, *Astrantia maxima* and *Iris sanguinea* ‘Snow Queen’ are lightened by the shimmer of *Deschampsia* and *Molinia* grasses. No detailed planting plans were made for the garden – Philip tends to amass a range of plants and then organises them into the available space once on site.

### Last-minute changes

The garden is essentially as Philip conceived it, although certain elements were lost in translation. A single large block of clipped box became eight separate box cubes at one end of the garden. Philip accepted the change and now rather enjoys it. He is full of praise for Tobias Nordlund, who led the construction team – Tobias also builds Ulf’s gardens, so Philip knew he was in good hands. The possible relocation of the garden to a new site in Gothenburg will hopefully give an opportunity to reflect again on the design and its qualities.

With his design work now taking him overseas, the sense of simply *being Philip Nixon* – rather than trying to be different for new audiences – suggests a growing confidence. In addition, he says the design and build process was a joy, as he was able to work to his own brief without having to comply with a client’s requests, and without the pressure of assessment and judging. The resulting garden shows a different side to conceptual design – quiet, subtle and thought-provoking rather than brash, colourful or overtly artificial. □



### DESIGNER PROFILE

Philip Nixon grew up in Turkey and Ireland and settled in Britain in his teens. He studied economics and then worked in the financial sector, in the City of London. Having always been interested in design since his youth, Philip took a garden design

MA at the Inchbald School of Design and then studied plantsmanship at the English Gardening School.

Collaborating with Marcus Barnett, Philip won two gold medals and a silver gilt at the Chelsea Flower Show. He went solo to design his most recent Chelsea garden, for Savills, in 2008. He runs a team of garden designers and landscape architects at his office in Chelsea, and divides his spare time between London and a base in the Cotswolds. He is also a trustee of the Landscape Design Trust, a charity that promotes high quality-landscape design.

## useful websites

### PLANTS

Philip Nixon’s favourite nurseries include two near Woking in Surrey – **North Hill Nurseries** at Scotts Grove Road, Chobham, Surrey GU24 8DW (tel 01276 858800, [www.northhillnurseries.co.uk](http://www.northhillnurseries.co.uk)) and **W Godfrey & Sons** at Hook Mill Nursery, Hook Mill Lane, Lightwater, Surrey GU18 5UD (tel 01276 471757, [www.wgodfrey.co.uk](http://www.wgodfrey.co.uk)). Both specialise in herbaceous plants and grasses. Philip also uses online plant supplier **Crocus** (tel 0844 557 2233, [www.crocus.co.uk](http://www.crocus.co.uk)).

### CONTAINERS

Philip’s favourite two suppliers are **Urbis** (tel 01759 373839, [www.urbisdesign.co.uk](http://www.urbisdesign.co.uk)) and Belgian firm **Atelier Vierkant** (tel +32 50 37 00 56, [www.ateliervierkant.com](http://www.ateliervierkant.com)).

### PAVING

**Stone Age** in Parsons Green, London and elsewhere in the UK (tel 020 7384 9090, [www.estone.co.uk](http://www.estone.co.uk)). Philip also uses **Devon Stone** (tel 01395 222525, [www.devonstone.com](http://www.devonstone.com)); showrooms in Exmouth and Kingsbridge, Devon.