

The inconstant gardener

Anthony Samuelson, an amiable eccentric with no experience of gardening, is Chelsea and Hampton Court flower shows this year. The retired lawyer

is a surprising exhibitor at the hallowed spoke to **James Alexander Sinclair**

FOR FIVE DAYS IN MAY THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS FLOWER SHOW IN the world takes place at the Royal Hospital. It is the culmination of months of hard work, aching backs and nervous excitement. Expert horticulturists, top garden designers, close to 200,000 visitors and most of the Royal Family gasp in wonder at the spectacle and expertise that is the Chelsea Flower Show.

However, if you think that there is no room among all this for the rank amateur, then you deceive yourselves: every so often something slips through the tightly meshed Royal Horticultural Society net. This year it is a mildly eccentric 77-year-old retired lawyer who is creating Show Gardens at both Chelsea (May 22-26) and at Hampton Court (July 3-8), despite having never even attended a flower show. It is the equivalent of one day playing swingball on the lawn to suddenly finding yourself facing Federer on Centre Court.

A search through Anthony Samuelson's long CV throws up no clues as to why he should suddenly fling himself into a new career. After National Service he qualified as a barrister (and indeed saw Derek Bentley sentenced to death in 1953 – his most vivid recollection being how ridiculous the black cap looked perched upon the wig of Lord Justice Goddard), before working as a financial analyst. All very conventional until you find out that he was, simultaneously, the agony aunt of the heavily airbrushed *Naturist* magazine.

In 1956 he and his brothers Sydney, Michael and David began building up the world's largest film equipment rental company. Somehow he also found time to win the 1969 *Daily Mail* Transatlantic Air Race, own a fleet of five Spitfires and breed thoroughbred racehorses in Newmarket.

It was upon retirement in 1987 that he began to spread his wings. Beginning with the invention of what he describes as "a unique form of promotional one-piece headwear consisting of ears on a cardboard headband" the phenomenon that is "Looneylugs" was born. The immense possibilities afforded by cardboard headgear is an area to which Samuelson has consistently returned.

Its ultimate manifestation was the publication of the *Daily Looney Lugs* in 1995. Published from a former lavatory on an island in the middle of the Charing Cross Road, it was a newspaper designed to be worn on the head. Like many of Samuelson's ideas it was before its time and, sadly, was a limited success – even when the 70p cover price was lowered to 1p. From publishing he moved to politics, and fought three by-elections as an anti-tobacco candidate. He is justifiably proud of the fact that 15 residents of Kensington and Chelsea wanted him to be their MP (tempered by the fact that 45 voted for a porn star named Louise Hodges).

You will notice that so far this story has been bereft of any sort of gardening – no soil and definitely no pretty flowers: be patient. Samuelson's great passion is art and in 1998 he submitted an entry for the Turner Prize. On May 29 several thousand commuters walked across a bridge wearing bright cardboard ears inscribed with the words "Art-iz-Us". The event was videoed for the Turner Prize committee who, unfortunately, were unimpressed.

Following this venture into the contemporary, Samuelson has settled into the grand oeuvre of researching what he describes as "the anatomy of ▶

An Englishman's home: Anthony Samuelson in the garden of his London house, surrounded by containers for his plants
Photography by TARA DARBY

◀ titillation”, which is not outright erotica but the arousing aspects of mainstream art. His research has resulted in rows of overflowing files. Among his, as yet, unpublished works are *A Surfers' Guide to Erotic Art on the Internet* and an inventory of erotic art in the National Gallery. His latest venture is a book called the *Ten Sexiest Moments in Mythology*, the first in a potential series including *Ten Sexiest Moments in Sport/Science Fiction/Art/History* and – my favourite – *The Bible*.

Last year, while creating a patio on which his wife, Carol, could recuperate after chemotherapy, Samuelson's thoughts turned to gardening. The garden of his fine Georgian house in north London, is refreshingly untroubled by garden design. As he explains, “The garden has only ever been there really for the children, and now grandchildren, to play in.” Things were about to change: it began with visits to his local B&Q

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Wednesday Diamond Discount Club, where he bought plants and cheap pots. “They were often wrapped in fascinating Malaysian newspapers” – Mr Samuelson has a thing about newspapers: the last 10 years' worth have been saved and are in a warehouse awaiting posterity.

One day he returned with a *Dicksonia antarctica* (tree fern) and, casting about for a container, happened upon an old water tank removed from his loft. The fern was planted, an underplanting of wooden spoons was installed and a new facet of garden design was born. “I call it *Patio Povera* and it is based upon the Italian movement *Arte Povera* – ‘Poor Art’ – begun in 1967 by the critic Germano Celant. He considered anything to be art, including live horses. My take on this was to use anything I could find as containers for plants.”

Inspired by a message from a publisher that rather than concentrating on *Sexiest Moments* it would be better to write a book on gardening or cookery “because people give them as Christmas presents”, Samuelson wrote 60,000 words on this subject – provisionally entitled *How To Put Pizazz Into Your Patio*. In order to promote this, he decided to try for a garden at Chelsea and, as a back-up, Hampton Court. Both shows accepted his designs so, aided by a former Hampton Court gold medalist, Daniel Lloyd-Morgan, landscape designer Lorna Mablin and illustrator John Camm, the cogs began to turn.

The Chelsea garden is based on a roof garden owned by a notional “young bachelor, unfettered by emotional relationships, who has studied art history”. Samuelson has trawled car-boot sales in search of handbags, hoovers, hammocks and hats; cages, cans, carrier bags and almost anything that will support a plant (including trunks formerly owned by Prince Michael of Kent). These are arranged into vignettes; most have an artistic subtext and carry a whiff of what the designer

Eye of the beholder: some of Samuelson's planted containers scoured from car-boot sales, including the rubber chicken and red suede boots in a planted birdcage. His garden is littered with mannequins, some dismembered for his 'body farm'

describes as “subliminal eroticism” (one wonders how many the RHS selection committee picked up upon).

Samuelson's garden is littered with “objets”, including his “body farm” of dismembered mannequins. Many will appear in the Chelsea garden – including assorted legs supporting a planted birdcage containing a pair of red boots (representing 18th-century portraits of recently deflowered young women by one Jean-Baptiste Greuze).

The centrepiece will be a reconstruction of the famous Gainsborough painting of Mr and Mrs Andrews. They are made from German mannequins and are a little creepy. Mr Andrews will be modelling a jacket covered with sprouting seeds (although Samuelson admits that the results of experiments have not been promising). Mrs Andrews, in a frock of violas, clutches a sage-stuffed rubber chicken. Next to them sits an 8ft tall Great Dane – formerly resident in Barbara Hulanicki's Biba foodhalls and bought at the Billy Smart's Circus closing-down sale.

The plant list for Chelsea has an uncharacteristic reliance on annuals (sprinkled with climbers and extreme exotics like an *Opuntia* cactus sprouting from a pot wearing a suede miniskirt), which are being grown not only by Samuelson but also at Capel Manor Horticultural College and by the good folk of Totteridge Gardening Club. They are looking rather weedy. Samuelson, however, says “if they are not up to scratch we will just have to buy some more”. Very straightforward, really. The garden is self-sponsored, so in order to recoup some costs, everything (apart from the dog, whose name is Othello) is for sale.

The Hampton Court garden is simpler but no less ambitious. It continues the strong environmental message and call for recycling demonstrated in the Chelsea garden – but with knobs on. A 1966, two-door Bentley of which only 30 were made will be balanced on its nose in the middle of a perfectly round pond.

“The car will stand 15ft 6in high,” Samuelson says, “and will have plants in every opening. Some will think it scandalous to treat a classic car in this manner: others will agree that the best fate for such gas-guzzlers is to turn them into ornaments.” After the show he intends to offer the car to Ken Livingstone for display in Trafalgar Square or to sell it to Charles Saatchi.

Samuelson is not a conventional man. His ideas are sometimes outlandish, occasionally scandalous but always entertaining. He has a deep desire to leave his literary mark upon the world and to this end he will never stop coming up with schemes and wheezes. There is no danger whatsoever of his 77-year-old brain atrophying through inaction or under-use.

I worry a little about the horticultural and design side of his gardens but nobody can give him less than 100% for originality and effort. In reply to a question about what he hopes to gain from Chelsea he is forthright: “I would like nothing less than a Gold Medal – although my most cherished ambition is to be a lecturer on ocean liners.” May God bless you, and all who sail with you, Mr Samuelson. ■

