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## International Gardening Festival inspires

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By Tim Richardson

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**If you like your horticulture on the wild side, the first international conceptual gardening festival, in the stunning setting of Emo Court near Dublin, should not be missed, says Tim Richardson**

The latest addition to the burgeoning worldwide phenomenon of the conceptual garden show is the first International Garden Festival (IGF) at Emo Court in County Laois, Ireland - right in the middle of the country.

This is a superbly organised and well-curated event, boasting perhaps the most beautiful setting of any such festival, in the park of a 1790 neo-classical mansion designed by James Gandon.

Just an hour from Dublin - between two motorways heading west into the tourist heartlands - the idea is that it will pick up en route interest as well as local support.

Like the original conceptual garden festival at Chaumont in the Loire Valley, Emo Court's festival will last all summer - until September 23 - so the gardens have time to settle in or grow.

That will help it get away from the "stage-set" feel of so many British flower shows. Fifteen international designers won through at the submission stage and went on to realise their designs on-site at the IGF, and the general standard is high, despite a lack of big names.

The idea with conceptualist gardens is that the design is based on ideas rather than decorative or functional precepts - these are gardens that tell stories, showcase unusual materials and challenge received ideas. There might not be much that you will want to translate directly to your own backyard, but conceptual gardens are undoubtedly inspirational.

So what are the highlights at Emo Court? The inaugural theme is Roots, and the host nation is well represented by Hugh Ryan and Gerard Mullen.

Ryan's stately "Altar Ego" consists of 10 giant slate slabs arrayed in rigid formation, with a curved mirror wall behind. It speaks powerfully of religious symbolism, pagan and Christian.

"Home Abhaile" was designed by Gerard Mullen, fresh out of college and evidently a rising star.

His exhibit seemed to get most people's vote, partly because of its sheer quality and partly because it is the most horticultural garden on show. Smooth-rendered Modernist walls frame views out to the lake and woods, while the planting within is wild in feel - ferns, thistles, verbascums, foxgloves.

Among the international submissions, I particularly enjoyed "Kanguroots" by Australian duo Neil Hobbs and Karina Harris, which featured graffiti-style panels and storyboards about characters such as outlaw Ned Kelly (who apparently had a job as a rose-pruner at one point).

"Frog's Dream" by Remi Salles used an intriguing triangular ground plan, piped music and goldfish to create his satire on the clichés about France and the French.

Finally, "Flying Visit" by the German partnership of Petra Bittkau and Friedrich Bartfelder was one of the subtlest designs on offer: a flying carpet made of grass, box balls and flowers, apparently being lifted skywards by the four large red helium balloons attached to each corner.

There are now major shows in the United States (Cornerstone, California), Canada (Metis, in Quebec) and Portugal (Ponte de Lima), with various one-offs such as Bilbao this year and Sweden coming up.

Even our own Hampton Court Flower Show now has a conceptual garden section, where the standard this year was extremely high (the highest, across the board, of any conceptual show I have ever seen).

But the gardens are only part of the story with these festivals: each one has its own special character, largely created by the setting. And that is where Emo Court really scores.

Everything about this show contributes to its relaxed yet elegant tone, from the informal car parking to the yew-lined walk towards the showground, and finally the breathtaking setting itself, on a gentle hill between the mansion and the lake, hemmed in on all sides by ancient woodland. Anyone fancy a jaunt to Ireland?

- International Garden Festival (IGF) at Emo Court, Emo, Co Laois, Ireland. The festival runs until September 23, open daily, 10am-6pm (00 353 1 288 9086, or visit [www.igf.ie](http://www.igf.ie))
- Tim Richardson's new social and political history, *The Arcadian Friends: Inventing the English Landscape Garden* (Bantam) is available for £23 plus £1.25 p&p. To order please call Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4112 or visit [www.books.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.books.telegraph.co.uk)

## WHAT IS CONCEPTUAL GARDEN DESIGN?

Conceptualist landscape design grew out of movements such as Modernism, Pop Art and Land Art.

In many ways it started in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a reaction to Modernism, with its rationalistic functionalism, its sober palette of greys and beiges, and its emphasis on straight lines, geometric pattern and gridded plans. A new generation of designers started using bright colours, surreal shapes and visual jokes in defiance of the tradition in which they had been schooled.

There is also a belief among conceptualists that a romantic pastoral vision is not necessarily always the best answer for public-space design, particularly in urban spaces. Conceptualists argue that urban landscapes should reference the life of the city and its inhabitants rather than evoke a fantasy of the countryside.

Martha Schwartz is the leading figure in conceptualist landscape design - her newest work is the spectacular Grand Canal Square in Dublin's South Docks, which can be combined with a trip to Emo Court.

There are now about 50 conceptualist landscape practices worldwide, and a book illustrating their work as a coherent movement is to be published (by Thames & Hudson) next spring.

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