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Honouring National Trust founder Octavia Hill in a design for the 2024 RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Ann-Marie Powell explains why Hill's pioneering mission is as pressing today as it was 150 years ago

Using eye-catching shades of rich and regal purple and an abundance of spaces to sit and take stock, Ann-Marie Powell and the Blue Diamond team are honouring the pioneering social reformer Octavia Hill at the 2024 RHS Chelsea Flower Show

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Ann-Marie Powell. | Photo credit: RHS and Oliver Dixon

A [nn-Marie Powell](#) and the [Blue Diamond](#) team are honouring the pioneering social reformer Octavia Hill, a founder of [the National Trust](#) who was a passionate advocate of improving urban housing and protecting green space. At this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show, the Octavia Hill Garden is conceptually located on an urban brownfield site that has been regenerated with a plant-filled urban community wildlife garden including a walkable stream, a wildlife pond and an observation platform.



The Octavia Hill Garden By Blue Diamond with the National Trust

Q: Octavia Hill is the most extraordinary pioneer who went on an incredible mission to protect green spaces and ensure everyone had access to the natural landscape. How did you find out about her, and why is it so important to celebrate her?

Ann-Marie: Blue Diamond had gone to the National Trust and said they would love to do a garden honouring Octavia Hill. I'd never heard of her, so I went away and started researching and I was blown away. I thought: 'Blimey, why isn't she as well known as Florence Nightingale?'

She was championing urban green space and access to nature in the countryside through footpaths, and she was a woman living in a very patriarchal society. She came from money and had quite philanthropic parents, but her father lost all of their money twice, so her mother, a school teacher, took Octavia and her sister to North Finchley. By the age of 13, Octavia was working at the school too, so she really did see both sides of life and saw that poverty brings ugliness, and denies access to beauty, nature and plants. She vehemently wanted to bring access to these essential elements to the masses.



The Octavia Hill Garden By Blue Dlamond with the National Trust

Q: How did you go about designing a garden that honours all those vital elements of Octavia Hill's vision?

I didn't want Hill to be seen as a historical figure rooted in the past, because she is still very relevant today, and it's shocking that 150 years later our landscape is in a worse state than it was in her day. I'm very interested in biodiversity, nature and the power of plants. I thought, 'Right, I need to take a deep dive into the facts.'

I looked at nature-rich spaces and found that as far as this country is concerned, we are losing our wildlife at a faster rate than anywhere else in Europe – and at a more alarming rate of knots than in China. There have been lots of reports from the [RSPB](#) and also [Buglife's Bugs Matter survey](#), and the results are terrifying. We will lose our world if we lose our wildlife.



The Octavia Hill Garden By Blue Diamond with the National Trust

If you don't allow access to green space, how can people know how to value it? One in three people in the UK don't have access to nature-rich environments. There's no legal requirement for developers to include green space, and budgets are being squeezed when it comes to caring for parks, so most of them are just grass deserts: there's nothing to keep you going back.

If Octavia were around today she would be on her soapbox trying to do whatever she could to change the situation. We need to create urban community wildlife gardens that are accessible to all — those who use wheelchairs, mums with buggies, those who are visually impaired or have sensory or mental health issues. I want to encourage people to get up close and personal with nature through beautifully rich planting schemes that attract pollinators, where you can look up to tree canopies or look down to see a pond. I want people to be able to find a rich diverse range of interesting, climate-tolerant, future-proofed plants that attract so much wildlife, and I want them to be able to experience it in towns.



The Octavia Hill Garden By Blue Diamond with the National Trust

Q: One of the most admirable elements of this garden is the way it facilitates conversation through the clever design of social spaces – it's a great garden to communicate in! Another area you are keen to highlight is the contribution of some of the amazing craftspeople you are working with to bring the design to life – can you tell us more about them?

Ann-Marie: Yes, I want to champion the incredibly skilled makers I am working with on this garden. We've got the amazing [Richard Weaver](#), an artist-metalsmith, and then there is Kate Hanrahan, who is carving storm-felled oak trees from a National Trust project. The hand-crafted steel structure is made by [Giles Jollands](#), John and Susan, who are architects working not far from me in Chichester. We're using steel because it can be recycled many times. [Sam Ogilvie](#) is making the structure from a contemporary thatch arrangement because it makes such good habitat for wildlife, and that's incorporated throughout the garden. I think Octavia would have wanted us to show what people are doing by hand: it's so inspiring.



Kate Hanrahan and garden designer Ann-Marie Powell discuss carving samples for The Octavia Hill Garden

Q: Turning to the planting, what are the highlights that we shouldn't miss?

Ann-Marie: Certainly the trees, which I don't think have been seen at Chelsea before. They're very resilient. Only seven per cent of our woodland in this country is in good ecological condition. All the rest is knackered because of climate change, so it's a huge problem. We're using a really interesting large shrub tree called *Maackia amurensis*, which is just the most amazing plant.

There are exciting plants like *Baptisia* 'Burgundy Blast'. We didn't want the colour palette to be too bright, so we're going with rich maroon and yellows and rusty oranges. We're using a lot of bulbs too, which we're layering – it's a brilliant approach for small gardens. We're using a new type of allium, and I've never seen a plant that's so loved by bees. There will also be a varying range of heights. We're thinking about it very three-dimensionally and looking through the seasons.

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