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Which ferns float your boat?



By **Emma Mills**

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Working at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show is a daunting prospect for most plantspeople, but for young fern fancier Hope Sharp it was a dream come true when she was asked to work on Bowden Hostas stand as the show's youngest ambassador.

The 16-year-old landed the job when she attended the show in 2014. She started talking to Tim Penrose, Bowden's owner, and they began to discuss the Latin names for plants and talked about a biology project Hope had done on ferns at school. Tim was so impressed by her knowledge and demeanour he invited her to join his team at Chelsea the following year.

She returned this year for the second time, after becoming the stand's bestselling saleswoman in 2015.

She says: "Chelsea was great, but it's also bizarre because there is nobody else my age there. Last year I found that particularly daunting, but this year I've become myself more and it's been nice to return."



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For Hope, one of the highlights of being at the show was that she was able to work alongside Prof Dick Hayward, who coincidentally was the oldest exhibitor at Chelsea.

Hope said: “Dick is a lovely guy and he educated me so much on ferns. He was telling me how to collect spores, how to propagate and he gave me some new sapling ferns to try and grow myself. I’ve learnt some really interesting skills that no one else has been able to show me.”

Hope has always had an eye for gardening: “From a young age my mum and my gran

would take me out into the garden and I would watch them plant different flowers.

“I want to tell people all about plants, I would love to be the David Attenborough of the plant world and be on TV to teach people about them”

Hope Sharp

“The first plant that I got stuck into before I discovered the world of ferns was a petunia. I kept it in my own little pot and used to look after it all the time.

“Eventually my parents gave me a small part of our garden to experiment with. The problem was it was surrounded by concrete and I couldn’t get anything to grow, it was really damp and would often get quite bog-like.

“I think that’s how my love for ferns came about because they love those damp shady conditions and they grew really well. Soon I had covered the whole garden in ferns and ivy. It looked beautiful.”

Hope has continued to expand her passion for gardening as she’s grown older: “It’s quite an unusual thing for a young person to be into gardening, it’s not seen as being very cool or something that teenagers should be into.





Hope has taken over her parents boat and turned it into a fernery CREDIT: CLIVE NICHOLS

“People think we should be into fashion and video games, and of course I’m into all of that stuff as well, but I love gardening because it means that I can get back to nature. With the stress of GCSEs especially, it’s so nice to be able to get away and just be with the plants.

“This year it’s been a bit crazy – I’ve had to balance exams with working at the show,” she adds. “It’s been tiring but it’s worth it.” Thankfully, her GCSE exam schedule hasn’t faltered, despite her dedication to work at Chelsea.

Hope recalls how one morning, she sat her maths exam before jumping straight on a train to London to work an afternoon shift at Chelsea. She even had to change into her Bowden Hostas uniform on the train.

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Hope Sharp

After passing her GCSEs Hope wants to study biology, ceramics, history and classics at A-level before heading off to university to study garden design. She says: “I’d love to do gardening for a job, I’ve got so many ideas in my head and so many gardens I want to plan.”

Hope recently had some hands-on experience with garden design:she created a lushious fern garden on her parents’ boat which is moored at Cadogan Pier near the Albert Bridge in London. Themed on items salvaged from the river, it features lots of pieces of driftwood and discarded junk such as old metal buckets. She also sourced makeshift pots from junk shops.

Hope says: “I love green plants because although you can get a lot of colour from flowers, there are so many different textures and shades of green. You can link them all together to make a really beautiful garden. That’s what my garden on the boat is about.”





The garden is themed around items you'd find in a river CREDIT: CLIVE NICHOLS

Attempting her own build hasn't been a smooth ride: "Because the boat is on the river, I have to deal with a lot of ducks and geese. It's been quite difficult as every time I plant a new plant – and I've had some pretty rare ferns up there – the geese decide to make a lovely nest out of it!

"I had to create a geese barrier to stop them from sitting down. They ate all my geraniums – but I've managed to stop them now."

Since her boat garden venture, Hope has dreamed of becoming a Chelsea garden designer.

"I'd like to start off with an Artisan garden [one of the small garden categories], but eventually I would love to create a garden on Main Avenue. That's the dream."

In the future, Hope wants to encourage others to get into gardening: “I would like to inspire more young people to garden because it helps with stress. It makes me relax – so hopefully it could help other people, too. There is going to be a lost generation of us if we don’t learn to garden.

“I want to tell people all about plants, I would love to be the David Attenborough of the plant world and be on TV to teach people about them.”

For anyone who feels gardening is not for them, Hope says: “Give it a go. It doesn’t matter if you’re buying the plant from somewhere like Homebase or a proper garden centre, even it’s just some vegetables or flowers. Start small and just build up. Even if it dies, don’t give up!”

Hope’s top five | favourite ferns

***Athyrium otophorum* var. *okanum* (eared lady fern)**

Likes most partial/full shade. Light green leaves with red stems.

Non- spreading and easy to care for, but doesn’t like wind so give it a sheltered spot. Adds colour to a shady spot.



***Athyrium filix-femina* ‘Frizelliae’ (tattooing fern)**

Likes sheltered moist dappled shade. Has unusual fronds which are long thin and, like its name, frizzled! Just looks different and

interesting.

***Dryopteris affinis* 'Cristata' (scaly male fern)**

A very upright golden brown fern, perfect for dry shade and can tolerate sun. Grows up to xxft (60cm) tall, but can reach 4½ft (1.5 m), so it's a big fern that's perfect for filling a large space.

***Polystichum setiferum* 'Congestum' (dwarf soft shield fern)**



A small dense fern that is evergreen in mild winters. It is perfect for rock gardens or borders, moist shade or semi shade. Ideal for a small garden.

***Blechnum brasiliense* 'Volcano'**

This very small South American tree fern likes a shady moist spot. It doesn't stand frost, and can grow up to 2½ft (75cm) tall. A beautiful rare fern for collectors, could do well in a sheltered city back garden.