

A Blue Forest treehouse is perfect for children of all ages



TREES OF LIFE

Treehouses aren't just for kids, says *Randle Siddeley*, as he builds one for Chelsea Flower Show

May is that delightful time of year when everything is in bloom again and gardens all over England are fragrant with jasmine and coming up roses. For me, late May also means the RHS Chelsea Flower Show and this year my team is going all out, teaming up with Fairmont Windsor Park Hotel and Blue Forest, which I consider to be the Rolls-Royce of treehouses (*blueforest.com*). Blue Forest makes the kind of extravagantly imaginative treehouses that appeal just as much to grown-ups as to children, all hand-crafted, bespoke and carefully constructed so as not to damage surrounding trees.

As Blue Forest's founder Andy Payne says, 'Everyone loves treehouses for some reason, whether it's a rambling shack up a ladder and your memories of being a child, or a man-cave in a tree, they're magic for everybody'. Blue Forest has a refreshing 'of course we can do that' attitude, which makes it a great company to work with and means there is no limit placed on a client's imagination.

The treehouse we're going to be exhibiting at Chelsea is around seven by five metres, so even though it's two metres above the ground it's big enough almost to fill the whole plot. Once we've dismantled it at the end of the show, it will be reinstated in a woodland area at the Fairmont Windsor Park hotel.

Around the treehouse, we're creating an instant woodland, and



Randle's Chelsea Flower Show garden will reach new heights this year

anyone with a large enough garden can do the same. I recommend Deepdale nursery, which specialises in ready-to-go fairly mature trees in containers. Their root balls are prewrapped in 'airpots', or black plastic aerated membranes, so they'll keep in their pots for two or three years and the roots won't emerge. Once you plant them out, the rootballs will quickly flourish (deepdale-trees.co.uk).

We've sited our treehouse amongst trees about eight metres high to give it a sense of proportion, starting with two black alders, *Alnus Glutinosas*. They're known for their timber because Dutch clog makers swear by it and it's also the wood used to make the charcoal for gunpowder. We'll also have a tall European beech, *Fagus sylvatica*, with lovely, feathery branches. Our challenge will be finding one tight enough so its branches don't spread out of our allotted space, but it will rise magnificently above the building, enveloping it and softening its form in green. Its branches will also provide a green screen around the top deck so you can imagine sitting in a bathtub up there in absolute peace and privacy. I'm also planting two multi-stemmed hazels, *Corylus avellana*, that you usually see in traditional woods and hedgerows.

Around the trees will be lush layers of ornamental plants, tolerant of dappled shade, like ferns, small rhododendrons, azaleas, camellias, digitalis and ferns. I use Kelways in Somerset, a garden supplier that's been around since 1851 and won Chelsea Flower Show medals, so it has reliable service and an excellent selection of woodland plants (kelways.co.uk). Visitors will enter our woodland site from an inviting paved area just off the main avenue and I've used Artisans to supply the paving stones.



Fill your flowerbeds below with cheerful digitalis



The treehouse garden Randle and his team will build alongside Blue Forest

'Everyone loves treehouses for some reason, whether it's a rambling shack... or a man-cave in a tree, they're magic for everybody'

PHOTOS: GETTY



Get to hard-to-reach treehouses in style with a Hill Hiker elevator

Finally, to add some theatrical fun and extra level of adventure, I started thinking about installing a fun outdoor elevator up to the treehouse. Anyone with a house perched on a cliff or hilltop will have a lovely view but perhaps the less lovely prospect of an arduous zigzag climb up to the top. On investigation, I found that funiculars are not available in the UK but then discovered US-based Hill Hiker. Founder Bill MacLachlan says his elevators are very popular with clients in places like Hawaii, Martha's Vineyard or Mustique, who want to be able to step from their yacht straight into a vehicle to whisk them up to their house. Hill Hiker's elevators are now available to import (hillhiker.com). They are basically outdoor boxes with handrails around them which can take up to six. A basic one will set you back \$100,000 or so but what smarter way to reach your tree house than via a Hill Hiker?

Meanwhile, Blue Forest will continue providing plenty of imaginative ways of getting up and down, from rope ladders, slides, tubes and zipwires to secret staircases hidden behind bookcases. The great thing about Blue Forest is that its treehouses inspire everyone's inner child. Even when the children have long grown out of them, they will provide adults with a sense of romantic escape into nature and satisfy everyone's fantasy of having a secret forest den or a magical entertainment space for a memorable lunch or dinner high in the treetops. A Blue Forest treehouse represents all the adventure and enchantment of a midsummer dream, and I am delighted to be collaborating with them at Chelsea. I very much look forward to seeing you all there.

Randle Siddeley is a leading landscape architect and garden designer.
randlesiddeley.co.uk ■