

NOT YOUR AVERAGE Joe

As he gears up to present the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, the down-to-earth TV gardener talks about cultivating creativity, growing through grief and the joys of just 'having a go'

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SILVERMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

Joe Swift still harbours rock-star dreams. "I'm a classic art-school dropout," he says cheerfully, recalling his teenage years as a bassist. "Our band were really quite dedicated, but then someone went out with someone else's girlfriend and that was the end of that." Joe scooted off to a kibbutz, attracted by the idea of travel and a tan for little more than a plane ticket, and got hooked on the outdoors. Back home, he took a job at a local gardening company with no grand plan and loved it. He was on his way.

Joe's siblings had taken different paths. Adam would become a political philosopher; Rebecca, a poet and editor. "The academic life was not for me," says Joe, the youngest of the three. "But I wasn't lying around doing nothing. I was always busy doing stuff." His dad, the actor Clive Swift (Richard Bucket in the BBC sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances*), questioned where this "stuff" was heading, but he'd split up from Joe's mum, the novelist Margaret Drabble (and sister of AS Byatt), when Joe was young and she was easy-going. "My parents weren't worried as long as I was happy. You couldn't really rebel in my family," he says.

THE MAKING OF JOE PUBLIC

Joe chats away with the pally warmth he displays on our screens presenting *Gardeners' World* and the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. He is self-deprecating and very funny. "My mum's a writer and my dad was an actor, and I was always like, 'I don't want to get involved in any of that stuff.' And I end up on the TV and I end up writing... But it's all about gardening and it's all about... Well, it's not all about me,

but it's my personality... My dad was always playing characters and my mum's always creating them. I'm just being myself."

As a child, Joe gardened with his grandparents. He would hold the bucket for Grandma Lily, on his dad's side, as she cut sweet peas and roses for her house in suburban Liverpool. And he'd potter about with his grandpa, on his mum's side, in his garden full of fruit trees in Suffolk. "He saw himself as Percy Thrower from *Gardeners' World* and would garden in a waistcoat. My mum, every now and again, says, 'Your grandpa would be very proud of you.'"

After a couple of years at the gardening company, picking up plant names from the *Reader's Digest* encyclopaedia in the van between jobs, Joe did a bit of landscaping in Australia. He then enrolled at The English Gardening School at Chelsea Physic Garden to study garden design, setting up a landscaping firm on the side. A few years later, running a gardening shop, he responded to an ad in a magazine for contributors to *Gardeners' World*. He has now been on the show for more than two decades.

THE CHELSEA CHALLENGE

His first presenting gig at Chelsea, which he is gearing up for again this spring, followed in 2001. "None of us knew what we were doing at first," says Joe, who learnt all he could from Alan Titchmarsh. "It's a very different kettle of fish to *Gardeners' World*, where you go to a garden for a whole day and say the same thing a million times until everyone's happy. This is effectively live - there's little time for editing and you're being watched by visitors - and it was nerve-wracking. We were ▶

“BY THE END OF CHELSEA, I FEEL LIKE I NEED TO LIE DOWN IN A DARK ROOM FOR A WEEK”

thrown in at the deep end. It was sink or swim.”

It’s easier now – a bit: “I get a real buzz. But I still sometimes think, ‘Shouldn’t someone who knows what they’re doing be doing this?’” You need stamina to get through. “They’re the longest days on earth. I can be on camera at seven in the morning till eight at night... Also, the amount you walk is amazing. You’re on your feet all day. By the end, it’s like, ‘I need to lie down in a dark room for a week.’”

Joe’s seen Chelsea through the gardener’s lens, too, when he designed the show garden for the Teenage Cancer Trust, sponsored by Homebase, in 2012. The design, which focused on sustainability, stood out for its use of cedar frames and low-maintenance plants. “I got a gold medal, which I’d told everyone wasn’t important, but of course it was,” he laughs. “It took me back to my art-school days because it was so creative and intense. You’re on site for three weeks and you don’t sleep properly and you don’t eat properly and you’re so tired and you’re always emotional. This garden’s going round in your head all day and all night. It was amazing, but stressful.”

This year, Joe is creating a Chelsea garden for the RHS, supporting the BBC Radio 2 campaign Big Bee Challenge, encouraging pollinators into our garden. The pressure’s off a little because it won’t be judged, but it still has to be right. “I’m going through those stressful times now,” says Joe, with a glint in his eye that suggests he rather enjoys it.

What ‘right’ means at Chelsea today has evolved over the years: “When I started, everything had to be perfectly in flower. Now, everyone is much less worried about that.” Last year’s show, which took place in September once lockdown had eased, showed the beauty of imperfection. “There were a lot of plants that were going over into autumn and it was lovely. They captured a moment in time. Gardens where everything was perfect looked a bit too perfect.”

GARDENING FOR BEGINNERS

Over the past couple of years, more and more of us have got into gardening, says Joe, who found himself “at the end of a hotline” for friends early on in the pandemic. “Some of them didn’t have the basics and, all of a sudden, they wanted to dig up the lawn and grow potatoes. A lot of them were scared about whether they were doing it right.”

His five beginner guides might come in handy to anyone now in that position. They cover small, modern, edible, nature and indoor gardens. “They’re pick-up-and-have-a-go books,” says Joe. “A combination of my experience and simple technical stuff. There’s a mystique about gardening where there shouldn’t be.”

Joe wants people to know that everyone, even experienced gardeners, fail. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes over the years,” he says

as if he’s telling a joke down the pub. “There’s the classic one of digging a pond and thinking I don’t want to get a skip, so I’ll use the soil for a rockery. And then, what am I going to put on that rockery? And then, now I want a path...” Great gardeners plan. “Design is key, so that you end up with something that’s greater than the sum of its parts.” It’s been one of his biggest lessons.

The pandemic has given Joe time to garden more, too. He’s done a bit in

east London, where he lives with his wife. But his passion is his one-acre plot in south-west France, which brims with alliums, camassias and lavender: “It’s absolutely buzzing in the summer.” Joe keeps an eye on it all year, wherever he is. “I’ve got a camera on the back of the house over there, so every single morning I look at my garden and see how it’s doing.” He also gardens between visits with his robot mower, which he operates from his phone: “I love a bit of technology when it works.”

Technology is fun, but nothing beats being hands-on, pruning and planting: “I write about gardens, I design gardens, I film gardens, but there is nothing better than getting lost in the garden. It takes me back to the real basics of how it makes me feel.”

Today, almost everyone is attuned to the therapeutic power of gardening, but gardeners have always been in the know. That’s certainly been the case for Joe, who talks movingly about how he’s gardened through grief. He lost his sister in 2017 and his father in 2019: “I’ve had big bereavements in the past few years, close friends and family, and I’ve gone straight out into the garden... Last year, my best friend died and I cried in the garden in France for two weeks. It was the best place to be. It felt like he was there with me. There was this huge outpouring of grief. I know gardening can do that for me.”

NEW SHOOTS

But you have to make time for it. And Joe has promised himself that he will over the next couple of years by concentrating on Modular, his design and build business. “Gardening is who I am,” he says simply. Some days, Joe might be picking out plants in a nursery for a home. On others, he might be working on bigger projects like Horatio’s Garden at the National Spinal Injuries Centre in Stoke Mandeville Hospital, which he created a few years ago. He also hopes to spend more time in the countryside and has been looking to move with his wife to Dorset. “We want to try living in the country for a year, with the mud and the inconvenience, to see if we can hack it,” he says in his down-to-earth way. Somewhere to garden would at least keep Joe busy for a while. And he does still have his bass guitar.

JOE’S Expert Gardening Guides – Create Your Own... Small Garden, Edible Garden, Indoor Green, Nature Garden and Modern Space – are out now (Collins Gardening, £4.99 each). RHS Chelsea Flower Show will be on BBC2 from 24 May.

Joe’s JOURNEY

1965 Born in Newcastle, while his mum, author Margaret Drabble, is visiting his dad, Clive Swift, an actor, on tour. Grows up in north London, with an older brother and sister

1980s Quits art college for life as a rock star. After the band breaks up, he spends six months in Israel on a kibbutz, where he falls in love with the outdoor life

1990 Studies garden design at The English Gardening School at Chelsea Physic Garden, while running a landscaping company

1998 Joins the *Gardeners’ World* team, after answering an ad in a magazine

2001 Starts presenting at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show for the BBC. He has since covered Hampton Court, Tatton Park and Malvern flower shows. Publishes *The Plant Room*, the first of several books over the coming years

2004 Sets up Modular, his garden design business

2012 Wins a gold medal at Chelsea for the Homebase/Teenage Cancer Trust show garden

2018 Horatio’s Garden at the National Spinal Injuries Centre at Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Joe’s most rewarding project, opens. It won a Society of Garden Designers award last year

2022 Brings out five guides showing how to create your own garden. Designs a garden for pollinators for the RHS at Chelsea, where he will return as a presenter

HAVE A GO... WITH JOE

PLAN I see people leave flower shows with one of everything. You’ll never get a good look with so much variety. Think where you’ll put plants first.

GO SLOW Invest in one or two specimens that will hold the garden together. Save a bit by buying larger-specimen perennials and grasses when they’re small – they grow fast.

THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX Opt for interesting levels and a range of plants over a minimalist look with a rectangular lawn that you’ll have to keep perfectly tidy.

WELCOME WILDLIFE Flowers, canopies, a wild patch or pond all provide food and shelter for birds and bees. You can include elements without sacrificing the look or use of your garden.

EMBRACE FAILURE Even experienced gardeners make mistakes. I should know. The basics will help you succeed, but you only get there by having a go.

DISCOVER THE GARDENS OF NORTH WALES and meet Joe on *Country Living’s* four-day tour of its best-loved gardens. For more information, see page 182.