

RACHEL  
DE THAME

Zinc, steel, lead, even rusty iron — this season's hottest materials have a distinctly metallic flavour

**M**etallics are hot right now. Fashion is agleam with liquid metal dresses; the spring/summer 2009 catwalks at Prada, Balenciaga and Versace shimmered with fluid columns in bronze, gold and silver palettes. This season's must-have gladiator sandals are punctuated with steel studs and metallic leather bags are festooned with chains.

Steel, zinc and bronze are also staples of interior design, with metal features in kitchens no longer restricted to purely practical sinks and taps. What's fashionable indoors is increasingly mirrored outside: recent years have seen garden designers working with metal, and this passion for ornamental elements is beginning to filter into mainstream gardens.

In its practical guise, metal has long been with us in the garden. The Victorian passion for mechanisation saw the installation of impressive cast-iron framed glasshouses with complicated vents, levers and heating systems. Beautifully forged vintage tools and galvanised steel watering cans are now the height of fashion with nouveau-green gardeners who like to know that they're practising sustainability by buying second-hand tools, while also enjoying something that looks attractively nostalgic.

Metal's practical uses are unquestionable, but using it primarily for its decorative qualities is a more recent phenomenon.

The annual round of flower shows provides a conduit through which these ideas flow, from those at the confluence of design, to the visitors hungry for inspiration. Tom Stuart-Smith was a forerunner of 2009 fashions, with his elegantly understated design for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show last year. Winner of a gold medal and the award for best show garden, it was an exercise in using metal to perfection.

His garden was dominated by a series of rectangular zinc tanks, designed by Andrew Ewing, which were filled to the brim with water, to reflect the sky and surrounding plants. Further panels of zinc formed the garden's back wall, the cloudy patina and malleability of the metal bringing a hint of softness to an uncompromisingly forceful feature.

In front of the wall, a row of immacu-

# Test your metal

Tom Stuart-Smith's winning 2008 Chelsea garden featured lots of zinc

lately clipped box balls nestled within circular zinc planters. Aside from the Flemish brick paths, zinc was the only landscaping material used in the garden. Blended with deceptively simple planting, the result was elegant, coherent and powerful.

The marriage of metal and plants continues to be a strong, recurring theme. Andy Sturgeon's Urban Greening exhibit at Future Gardens, in Hertfordshire, which runs until October, celebrates green spaces in our cities by juxtaposing monoliths of oxidised steel with slender silver birches and simple, low-level perennials and soft grasses.

Beauty aside, it was heartening to see many show gardens incorporating metal in practical ways. At the RHS Hampton Court Flower Show last month, A Beekeeper's Garden, designed by Nicola Hills and Jonathan Denby, included understated metal elements in a classical setting.

The timber edges of the paths surrounding the planting beds were trimmed with a narrow strip of copper, which was good-looking and excellent for keeping slugs at bay — they get an electric shock when they come into contact with the metal. And a vegetable-clad pergola, created by the blacksmith Chris Payne, was painted in a soft green

that would look perfectly at home in my farm garden in rural Oxfordshire.

The winning garden in the small sustainable garden category at Hampton Court was bursting with ideas. Wendy Allen's The Rain Chain included reclaimed rail track and chunky metal chains, which directed excess water from a green roof into one of the most stylish water butts I've seen. It was made by Toby Clayton, of Hot Metal Engineering, from a reclaimed rusted oil tank. All the metals had been allowed to rust.

"Cor-Ten steel has the same effect and doesn't degrade over time," Allen says. "Sadly, the manufacturing process

is not very sustainable." The rusty look has been a recurring theme in many gardens and displays, with the warm tones of the rusted metal sitting comfortably alongside foliage and flowers, particularly those of a plum, burgundy or burnt-orange hue.

Having spent much of the summer at these shows, I found myself looking for ways to introduce metal into my own garden without spending a fortune. I'd like to install a large ironwork frame — something between an arch and a pergola — as the centrepiece of one of the garden rooms I'm planning, although this is still in the "thinking", rather than "doing", stage.

We already have a metal-framed greenhouse, painted in the same pale green that is often used on doors and window frames in this part of the Cotswolds. I'm also keen on simple painted metal furniture, both old and new. I found a small French seat for the herb garden that can accommodate two adults at a squeeze, but works best when shared with a child. Also in the herb garden, we have a collection of zinc pots, which I bought for a song at the market and planted up with varieties of mint.

Metal containers look great and have long been popular. Galvanised steel was the preferred material in the first wave of contemporary-style domestic gardens, but there's now a huge range

of metals and finishes available, from a variety of sometimes surprising sources. Knoll Gardens, a Dorset nursery that specialises in grasses, is offering rectangular rusted steel planters that perfectly complement the plants.

If budget allows, lead is the ultimate metal — its solidity, weight and traditional good looks combine to give it endless longevity. When Gerard and I got hitched, we chose to commemorate the occasion by commissioning a plain rectangular pot with 1999 embossed on one side. A decade on, it looks as fresh and unravaged by time as it did on the day I filled it with white roses and artemisia. Which is more than I can say for us.

This planter sits at the base of a north-facing wall, and it is important to position metal containers in a shady spot, or to line them with a substantial layer of insulating material, such as polystyrene, to avoid cooking the roots on a sunny day.

Of course, pots don't have to be planted up to make an attractive feature; the repetition of three or more large identical containers makes a strong visual statement without further adornment.

Using metal in small doses like this is an excellent way to introduce the material to those of us who are more used to timber and terracotta; covering entire surfaces with metallic sheeting and

constructing dominant structural features from recycled scaffolding poles requires commitment.

The starting point is to choose your metal. Zinc is one of my favourites, whether used with plants or not. It can be shaped into myriad forms and has an irregularity that works well in a modern setting, but doesn't look out of place in an informal rural garden such as my own patch.

The putty-coloured stone in this area also makes a perfect partner for other cool-toned metals, such as stainless or galvanised steel and lead. In turn, these metals would combine well with the grey of York stone, granite, flint and slate. Bronze, or mild steel that has been allowed to rust, won't look out of place here either, but the warmer-toned metals — copper, brass and gold — are better suited to brick, terracotta and yellowish sandstones.

With the addition of the latest powder-coated finishes, steel now comes in a range of colours, with different degrees of sheen, from matt to ultra-shiny, which means it can be adapted according to the surface. These colours can be speckled or spiced up with added sparkle and are available in perfectly smooth or textured options.

Whether as a structural building material, a landscaping surface fabric or in design details, there's a place for metal in most gardens. It can form the



Sleek steel pots are a telling detail



David Harber's metal circle; davidharbersundials.co.uk



Neglected? No, rust is a statement

framework for the entire thing — small urban spaces achieve drama through the bold use of a single material — or individual features. Steel poles, in a variety of finishes, can be used to create streamlined modern pergolas and trellises, while wrought iron is still popular for traditional gardens. Metal sheeting makes an effective wall covering and can be incorporated into a water feature.

Whether contemporary or conventional, intricate design details using metal add contrast, texture and a hint of sheen. When it comes to accessories — water features, garden art and sculpture, furniture and decorative features such as bird baths and feeders — the type of metal and the style in which it is used offers endless permutations.

Design shows and a trawl on the internet quickly reveal products ranging from sleek, ultramodern water spheres in polished steel to rustic twisted-wire animal sculptures and polished brass sundials. All will stand the test of time aesthetically, and there are real treasures to be found.

➔ Next week: metallic-hued plants

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