

A sense of proportion

Garden sculpture is no longer the preserve of those with vast plots, says Charlotte Abrahams. Modern outdoor art is far more versatile than that. Portrait by Sue O'Brien

If there's one thing TV makeovers have given us, it's an appreciation that there is more to a garden than plants. Often, with terrible consequences: I'm thinking twee water features, cheap decking and strange ornaments (dinosaur egg, anyone?). But the effects haven't all been bad: Geraldine Rudge, editor of *Crafts* magazine, says such shows have fuelled the demand for proper sculpture in our gardens: "Outdoor art is very big business these days."

While most of us still go for cheap, mass-produced ornaments from our local garden centre, an increasing number are buying bespoke from a growing number of craftspeople who specialise in boldly contemporary outdoor art. People such as Ruth Moilliet, 34, who graduated three years ago with an MA in art as environment, and whose large metal sculptures have already won her an international reputation. Her inspiration comes from the intricate forms she finds in plants and flowers, and one of the main attractions of her work is the contrast between the strength of the steel she works with and the delicacy of the subject matter.

The other draw is the scale of the pieces: they're vast. Moilliet's Seedheads range from 65cm to 1.5m in diameter. "The enlarged scale

reflects a childhood dream to be able to shrink in size like Alice. I want to be engulfed in each flower so that I can explore its floral architecture."

Of course, this sort of thing can cost thousands of pounds, but that's no more than a smart sofa, say. And such pieces work well in modest plots, too. Graham Sterry, of contemporary garden furniture store Barbed, says, "People with small gardens think they should buy small sculptures, but while they look great in the shop, in a garden they just get lost behind other plants and under leaves. Large sculptures, however, have real impact in small spaces."

Moilliet works mainly in marine-grade stainless steel that has been corrosion-protected, but Seedheads also come in powder-coated mild steel that will rust over time. "This gradual change gives the work an organic feel and helps it blend into the natural environment," she says.

So what drew her to outdoor rather than indoor sculpture? "It was partly the subject matter," she says. "I'm inspired by natural things, so I wanted to bring my work back to where it came from, but it was also to do with scale: I wanted to make things as large as possible – and there's more room outside."

Seedheads, made to order, from £1,800, by Ruth Moilliet, 07973 908839 (ruthmoilliet.com).



