NATURE'S CURE

THE CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW RETURNS THIS MONTH WITH A NUMBER OF GARDENS EXPLORING COMPLEX MEDICAL CONDITIONS AND THE LINK BETWEEN MEDICINE AND NATURAL HEALING

WORDS: WILL MOFFITT

"IN THE EAST, the human body is seen as a form of nature in operation," Jihae Hwang tells me. "I believe that human bodies cannot be separated from nature because everything we breathe in and out, eat and drink eventually forms our bodies."

The Korean garden designer and environmental artist is a regular at the Chelsea Flower Show where she turns shrubs, plants and mounds of earth into living works of art that draw on personal, political and historical themes. In 2012 she won a gold medal and the Royal Horticultural Society's president's award for Quiet Time: DMZ Forbidden Garden, which recreated the jungle-like wilderness of the demilitarised zone separating North and South Korea.

This year Jihae is once again drawing on her roots for A Letter from a Million Years Past, a show garden inspired by Jirisan, the highest mountain on mainland South Korea that is fondly dubbed "mother mountain".

Known as the last primeval forest, the terrain is home to around 1,500 varieties of medicinal herbs and has played a formative role in the development of oriental medicine. The seeds of the plants used in Jihae's garden were originally collected from Jirisan mountain by a British plant hunter 30 years ago.

JIHAE HWANG

"Before western medicine was introduced into the country, medicinal herbal plants were picked from the mountains and the fields to treat diseases," Jihae explains. "Simply put, the mountains served as the pharmacy and the hospital."

By evoking the feel of this terrain and its historic significance Jihae is paying homage to her homeland, but she is not alone in curating a garden with a medical theme. Multiple projects at this year's event are dedicated to complex – and sometimes misunderstood or lesser known – medical conditions, and the link between medicine and natural healing.

Cavernoma on My Mind, designed by Taina Suonio and Anne Hamilton uses tactical planting techniques to depict and evoke feelings or symptoms that are common among patients with cavernoma. A lesion made up of abnormal blood vessels, often found in the brain or spine that can cause strokes, seizures, neurological deficits and even death, the designers have used blood-bark maple to illustrate those thin blood vessels and prickly foliage to echo the shooting nerve pains that patients suffer from.

Meanwhile the Myeloma UK – A Life Worth Living garden by Chelsea stalwart Chris Beardshaw marks 25 years of Myeloma UK, which supports patients and raises awareness of this incurable, but treatable, blood cancer.