

## EVOLVING WORK

More recently, Ruth has developed her allium concept further, adjusting the fabrication process to produce smaller, individual stems 4in (10cm) in diameter. First, she creates a complete circle of flowers radiating from a central ring, using a frame, or jig, to support the structure as she works. The flowers are then formed by hand so each lies at the correct angle, and the whole is placed over an upright rod. One by one, more flower circles are added, until the sphere is complete. The main stem is bolted to the core, and the finished allium lacquered in a range of colours. "I originally produced 255 of these for a property development," she says. "Everyone who bought an apartment was presented with an allium stem in a special presentation tube, which I thought was a nice idea. They were so popular I've kept making them. People like to collect different ones."

Other new work has focused on exploring the shapes created by flowers and plants as they grow in clusters. "Rather than looking at individual flowers, I'm creating pieces using the patterns and shapes of flowers in relief, so the different structures appear as cut-outs in the metal," she explains. "The surface of the piece is polished and textured to catch and reflect the natural light, while the cut-outs create shadows within the work, adding depth.

"I'm also exploring new technologies, hoping to create interactive artworks that use different media to reflect the activity going on around them. This could be real-world elements, such as the movement of people and changes in the wider environment. Adding another dimension to my designs will be really exciting, but I will always keep making the alliums. They still fascinate me."



Ruth sketches her designs, which are scanned onto a computer before being laser cut by an expert. She now produces some alliums just 4in (10cm) in diameter.



natural world, how plants and insects need each other to survive, and how we need them."

In 2001, Ruth won a two-year grant from the North West Arts Board to set up a studio. Then, a major breakthrough came in the shape of an invitation to exhibit at the Crafts Council. Here, her work, and particularly the alliums, gained wide recognition. Since then, she has exhibited up and down the country, in galleries and sculpture parks, as well as making commissioned pieces for the home and public spaces. Each can take between four and six weeks to complete.

### Fabrication

Because of their size, her sculptures are made in sections. For the alliums, which usually start at 2ft (55cm) in diameter, but can be up to 6½ft (2m) across, the central core, stems and petals are made separately. To bring her ideas to life, Ruth has teamed up with Lancashire-based metal fabricators and laser cutters, often going into the workshop to work alongside them.

"We've built up really close relationships over the years," she says. "Working with specialist companies like this lets me pick up on their expertise with the material, adding to my own knowledge. It allows me to broaden, rather than limit, my ideas and designs. It also gives me flexibility, letting me work on several pieces at a time."

An initial sketch of the design is followed by a to-scale model of the piece, using paper, card and aluminium foil. This gives her a better understanding of how the materials can be formed and recreated in a bigger composition.

Sketch and model are then used as a guide for fabrication. The core of the allium is cut from metal sheet and rolled to create a sphere, to which the steel-rod stems are welded. This is the most intricate part of the work: "It's a very specific thing. There's a set way to make sure that all the stems are attached to the core at the correct angle. Because the flowers aren't attached to the stems when you're doing it, you've got to visualise the spacing. It does take some working out, especially when the piece has stems of different lengths."

Once the stems have been attached, the whole core of the piece is bead blasted to give it a matt finish, and chemically cleaned. It is then taken to Ruth's studio in Ramsbottom, where she adds the flowers by hand.

### Flower arranging

The number of flowers to be placed around the core of the allium is worked out mathematically. "I'll look at the size of the sphere, work out its surface area and the flowers I am using, and then work out the number I need. This can range from 400 up to 650, depending on the look required for the finished sculpture. If they're quite far apart, as with the *Allium schubertii*,