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DECEMBER 2024/ISSUE 262/£7

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## WINTER WONDERLAND

As the 2024 International Garden Festival at Chaumont-sur-Loire draws to a close, three of the participating designers – Annick Lavallée-Benny, Hanna Reidmar and Etienne René-Contant – are celebrating winning the Creation Prize for Théâtre du Rideau Blanc (pictured), their response to this year's Festival theme of the garden as a source of life. Designed as a winter landscape, the scene is one of calm silence, a monochrome world 'holding its breath' while it waits for Spring. Seated inside the timber structure, visitors can enjoy the 'show', watching the characterful and diverse evergreens above ground while wondering as the 'snow and ice' protect the sleeping bulbs, seeds, roots and micro-organisms below. The question is, say the designers, 'Who's watching whom?'

Garden designers interested in entering the 2026 competition should visit [domaine-chaumont.fr/en/international-garden-festival/contest-home-page](https://domaine-chaumont.fr/en/international-garden-festival/contest-home-page)



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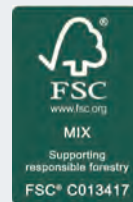
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SOCIETY OF GARDEN DESIGNERS

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**Cover image:** photograph, Ray Cox – UK Design; see page 22.



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[media.co.uk](http://media.co.uk)

I am always envious of the SGD Awards judges' opportunities to visit the gardens they shortlist for the Main Awards, and this year's crop (see page 26) looks superb; I wish I had more room in the magazine to showcase them all in far greater detail. Holly Birtles talks to Zia Allaway about her Awards entry, a regenerative garden that she is building in Devon (see page 17), and I shall endeavour to bring you more stories about others in the shortlist next year. Elsewhere in this issue, Nicholas Atherton's Merstham Park School project is a model for biophilic design (see page 43) while the horticulture scene in Yorkshire is riding high (see page 37). Happy Christmas!

**Arabella St John Parker, Editor**

Arabella



**JOIN US TODAY: BECOME  
A MEMBER OF THE SOCIETY  
OF GARDEN DESIGNERS**

**The Garden Design Journal** is the journal of the Society of Garden Designers (SGD): the only professional association for garden designers in Britain. The Society has been championing excellence in garden design for more than 40 years and counts some of Britain's leading garden and landscape designers among its growing membership. The SGD welcomes everyone working or studying in landscape and garden design to join the Society. It is committed to high standards of professional practice and actively encourages its members in their efforts to raise and maintain these standards.

#### Categories of membership

**STUDENT MEMBER** Open to students currently attending a suitable course – see website for details.

**PRE-REGISTERED GRADUATE** For those who have recently obtained their garden design qualification and who wish to begin on the Pathway to Registered Membership.

#### PRE-REGISTERED MEMBER

Open to all professional garden designers who aspire to Registered Membership. Applicants need to provide evidence of

competence in garden design either by qualification or review, plus evidence of professional indemnity insurance. This category now includes submission for accreditation as an inclusive fee – there are no additional charges.

**REGISTERED MEMBER** The status awarded to professional garden designers who have been assessed and approved by the SGD Accreditation Panel. MSGD (Member of the Society of Garden Designers) or FSGD (Fellow of the Society of Garden Designers) can be used after their name and they are profiled and promoted on the SGD website.

#### AFFILIATED BUSINESS

**PARTNERSHIPS** Open to landscape professional suppliers who foster and promote sustainable and environmentally friendly garden design, using responsible techniques and practices.

**REGISTERED PRACTICE** A category for Registered Members who would also like to advertise their practice alongside their MSGD/FSGD status.

• You can also join the Society as a Friend. To find out more, visit the SGD website: [www.sgd.org.uk](http://www.sgd.org.uk)



## Letter from Council

Winter – how did it arrive so quickly? One moment, the leaves are set in full splendour and the next, the world is dusted with frost, and the cold begins to settle in. Yet, what an incredible time of year it is.

As the temperatures drop, the landscape sheds its colourful, leafy cloak and reveals its underlying structure more clearly. Perennials are replaced by the rich, earthy tones of the soil. Bare branches frame the horizon, and the ground re-emerges, reminding us of its profound significance.

Soil serves as the foundation of entire ecosystems. It not only supports the lush greenery and towering trees that define the seasons, it upholds the entire food chain. Soil regulates water, absorbing and filtering rainfall to prevent flooding and ensuring that what reaches our rivers and lakes is clean.

Beneath the surface, soil is alive with activity, a bustling habitat teeming with micro-organisms, fungi, and insects that tirelessly break down organic matter, converting it into the rich nutrients that plants need to grow.

Soil also plays an astonishing part in managing the climate. As plants grow, they absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, storing it and, eventually, transferring it to the soil through decay. This process transforms soil into one of the planet's largest carbon reservoirs, an essential service that often goes unnoticed.

Indeed, how often do we work to cover up soil, paving over it, landscaping it, planting crops in it, rarely stopping to consider its importance. Perhaps winter offers us the perfect time to pause, reflect, and acknowledge its quiet beauty.

Andrew Duff

**Andrew Duff MSGD**  
**Chair, Society of Garden Designers**



#### SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Find out about sponsorship opportunities for the SGD Awards and conferences by contacting Andy Barringer at [sponsors@sgd.org.uk](mailto:sponsors@sgd.org.uk)

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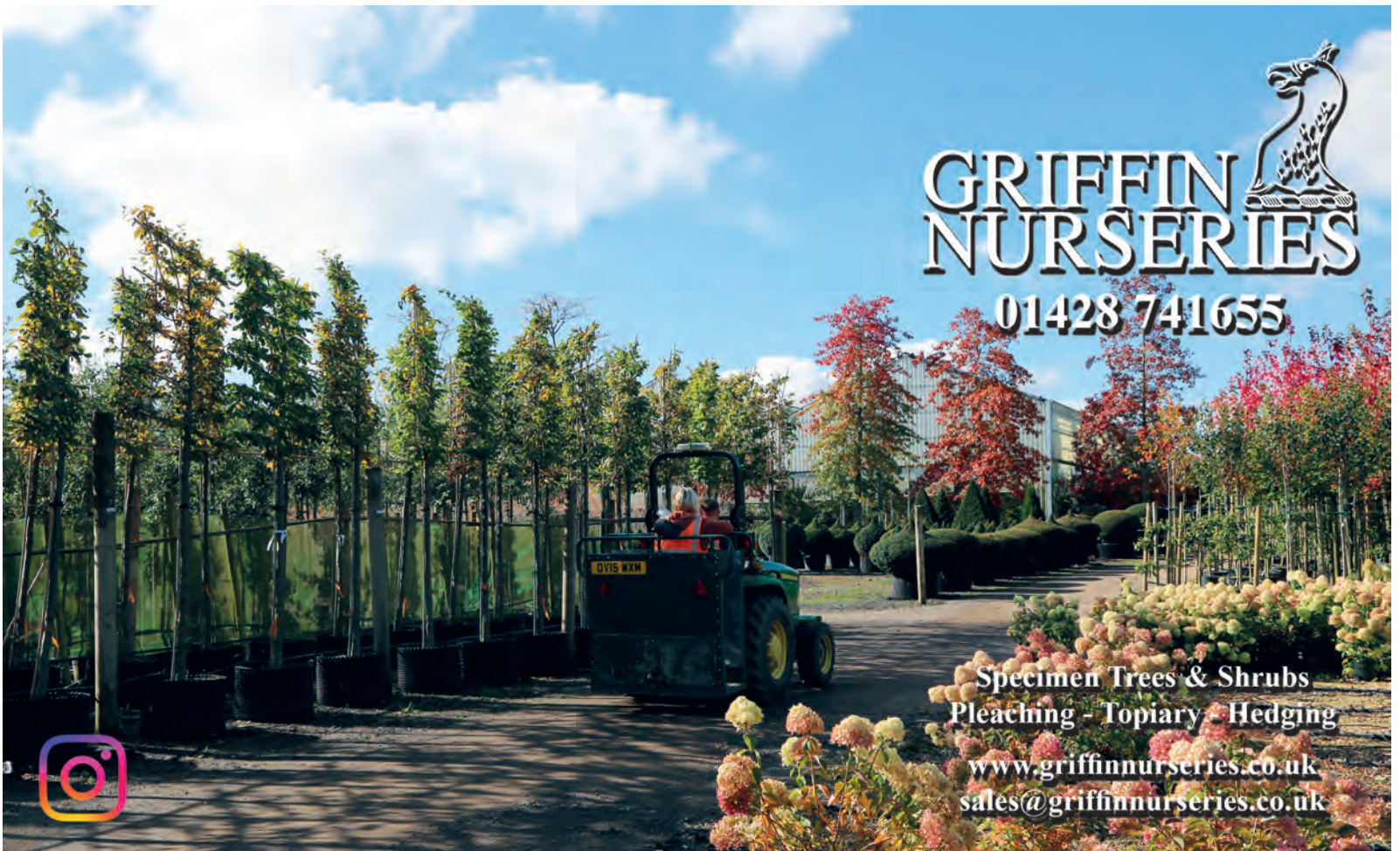
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# NEWSPRINT

All that's new in the world of garden design  
*Compiled by Zia Allaway*



## TOP PRIZES GO TO SGD MEMBERS AT NATIONAL LANDSCAPE AWARDS 2024



**ELEVEN MEMBERS OF** the Society of Garden Designers (SGD) are celebrating after winning National Landscape Awards in both the Design and the Construction categories of this year's competition, with Tony Woods MSGD, the managing director of Garden Club London, taking home a grand total of five awards, and Adam Vetere MSGD winning four.

Both designers were awarded prizes in the Design Excellence: Overall

Scheme Over £100,000 category for their Wandsworth Garden and Our Happy Place respectively. The two other awards in this category were won by Paul Cowell MSGD, for his Private Residence in Asstead project, and Robert Hughes MSGD, for The Dairy House.

Three of the designers also secured an Accredited Contractor & Accredited Designer Joint Submission Award for the same gardens: Tony, with the

landscaping division of his company, Garden Club London; Paul and his company PC Landscapes; and Adam, together with his contractor JJH Landscapes.

The two winners of the Design Excellence: Overall Scheme between £50,000 and £100,000 category were James Scott FSGD, for his Contemporary Sanctuary, and Rosemary Coldstream MSGD for The Tranquil Garden.

SGD members and gardens designed by members were also among the winners of the construction awards. In the Domestic Garden Construction: Between £60,000 and £100,000 category, SGD Affiliate Landesigns won for its Tranquil Garden, designed by Rosemary Coldstream MSGD. Vu Garden Design & Landscaping, headed by SGD Student Filip Szczechowicz and his father Rafal, secured an award for Elder House.

In the Domestic Garden Construction: Between £100,000 and £250,000 category, the winners included Garden Club London for Girdlers Road; JJH Landscapes for Our Happy Place, designed by Adam Vetere MSGD; Landscape Associates, for An Elizabethan Garden with a Modern Twist, also designed by Adam with pre-registered

SGD member Katherine Lee; and Paul Cowell's company PC Landscapes for a Private Residence in Asstead.

Award winners in The Domestic Garden Construction: Over £250,000 category included John Wyer FSGD's company Bowles & Wyer for A Cambridgeshire Garden; Garden Club London for its Wandsworth Garden; Landesigns for Down To The River, designed by Rosemary Coldstream MSGD; The Garden Design Company, led by SGD Friend Rob Jones, for The Manor House; and Ryan Alexander Associates for a project on the Isle of Wight, designed by Andy Sturgeon FSGD.

Bowles & Wyer also secured the Soft Landscaping Construction (non-domestic): Under £500,000 Award for its Castle Hill Quad garden at St Peter's College in Oxford, while Garden Club London won its last prize of the night for Employer Excellence: Turnover Over £2.5 million.

Designers and companies will also be competing for the prestigious Grand and Principal Awards at a ceremony on 6 December, at the JW Marriott Grosvenor House Hotel on Park Lane, London. For a complete list of all the award winners, visit [baliawards.co.uk](http://baliawards.co.uk).



National Landscape Awards winning gardens by (clockwise from top left) Rosemary Coldstream MSGD, Tony Woods MSGD, Adam Vetere MSGD and James Scott FSGD.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## ACCREDITATION AND AFFILIATE UPDATE

The Society of Garden Designers (SGD) has awarded Fellowships to long-standing members Arabella Lennox-Boyd and Thomas Hoblyn in recognition of their outstanding contributions to the profession. The Society also congratulates Dan Hartley, Jason Russell, and Alexandra Gray, who have passed accreditation for their first projects, and Jane Ashley, Judy Shardlow, Kate Hillock, Laura Burt, Joanne Evans, and Marissa Carrara, who have all passed their second projects. It also welcomes three new SGD Affiliates: wholesaler Creepers Nursery ([creepersnursery.co.uk](http://creepersnursery.co.uk)); wholesale nursery Evergreen Exterior Services ([evergreenext.co.uk](http://evergreenext.co.uk)); and green systems specialist Mobilane ([mobilane.com/en](http://mobilane.com/en)).

## KEW MOBILISES AGAINST ILLEGAL PLANT TRADE

Conservation charity TRAFFIC and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew have joined forces with online retailer eBay to develop a blueprint for its own and other platforms to strengthen online trading policies, to prevent the illegal trading of plants via social media and e-commerce platforms. Funded by the British government through the Illegal Wildlife Trade Challenge Fund, the collaboration aims to improve the online trading landscape for the benefit of plants and plant enthusiasts. [kew.org](http://kew.org)

## ACTION AGAINST IPS TYPOGRAPHUS

The Forestry Commission has implemented targeted measures to mitigate the spread of *Ips typographus*, commonly known as the eight-toothed spruce bark beetle. Since its first detection in 2018, 16 areas in southern England have been designated for heightened vigilance. The adult beetle bores into the tree's bark to create galleries where it attracts mates and deposits eggs, which can be spread during forestry operations. [gov.uk](http://gov.uk)

## TOM MASSEY MSGD'S INSECT GARDEN OPENS IN EAST LONDON

THE ROYAL ENTOMOLOGICAL SOCIETY'S 2023 RHS Chelsea Show Garden, designed by Tom Massey MSGD to raise interest in insects and insect science, has been installed (pictured) in its permanent home at Stratford Cross, the cultural quarter at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in east London.

'Stratford Cross is a fantastic example of how it's possible to deliver a sustainable built environment that prioritises benefits for both people and nature,' Tom commented.

'It's great to see the garden come to life in its permanent home as a platform for the Royal Entomological Society to raise awareness of insects and their importance in the global environment.'



The new Insect Garden, which has been funded by Project Giving Back, Lendlease, SHIFT, and Royal Entomological Society supporters, includes an augmented reality bug trail that is led by the Aardman character

Lloyd, from the comedy series *Lloyd of the Flies*, and offers children and adults the opportunity to learn more about the vital role insects play in urban environments. [tommassey.co.uk](http://tommassey.co.uk); [royensoc.co.uk](http://royensoc.co.uk); see also page 50.



## COMPETITION LAUNCHED TO DESIGN SGD TRADE STAND FOR RHS CHELSEA 2025

FOLLOWING THE SUCCESS of the Society of Garden Designers' (SGD) trade stand (pictured) designed by Rosemary Coldstream MSGD for this year's RHS Chelsea Flower Show, the Society's Council has launched a competition for SGD members to design another new look for next year's Show.

A brief has been sent to all full members and Fellows of the Society, and the deadline to enter is 30 November 2024. The winning entry will be announced in December and will be featured in *Garden Design Journal* early in 2025.

Rosemary's imaginative solution for the 2024 stand drew an unprecedented response from visitors to Chelsea and won Four Stars, the best RHS trade stand award that the SGD has won to date.

## URBAN GARDENS STRATEGY NEEDED FOR 1.5 MILLION NEW HOMES, SAYS RHS

FOLLOWING THE BRITISH government's announcement of ambitious housebuilding targets over the next few years, the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) is calling for the provision of gardens to be central to these plans.

The charity is also demanding a review of the Biodiversity Net Gain 4.0 metric, updated planning guidelines to require cultivated landscapes, and garden masterplans to be included in developments in urban areas.

'A collaborative and co-ordinated strategy is needed that puts gardens and cultivated green spaces at the heart of our communities, leveraging their numerous benefits for many more people and providing space for active and not simply passive engagement with nature,' commented Professor Alistair Griffiths, RHS Director of Science and Collections. [rhs.org.uk](http://rhs.org.uk)



Gardens need to be at the heart of communities, says the RHS.



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## MAJESTIC TREES WINS TOP GROWER OF THE YEAR AWARDS

**THE HORTICULTURAL TRADES** Association (HTA) has bestowed two of its most prestigious awards on Majestic Trees at the 2024 HTA Grower of the Year Awards.

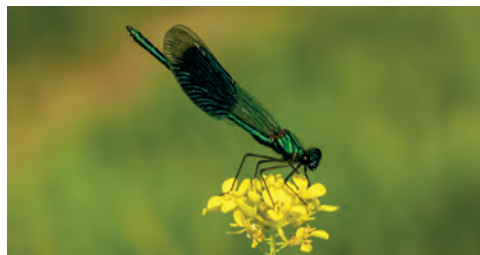
The Hertfordshire-based tree nursery picked up both the Blooming Marvellous Employer and Life Beyond Peat Awards, while one of its employees, Richard Pavey, received the prize for Best Staff Member.

Other HTA accolades were won by Provender Nurseries, winner of the Inspirational Business Award, and David Austin Roses and Double H Nurseries, joint winners of the Best Plant Producer Award.

Henil Vashi from Robin Tacchi Plants won Young Grower Under 35, while Mike Burks, Managing Director of The Gardens Group, was awarded the 2024 Pearson Memorial Medal for his environmental work and outstanding contribution and leadership in the garden sector. [hta.org.uk](http://hta.org.uk)



Pictured, from left to right: Majestic Trees Managing Director Steve McCurdy, Ellen Underwood, who was Highly Commended in the Young Grower Under 35 category, and HTA President Will Armitage.



## NEW GUIDANCE ON BNG REQUIREMENTS AND A CALL FOR LOOPHOLES TO BE CLOSED

**DEFRA HAS ISSUED** new guidance to clarify how planning applications should work with regards to Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) and the introduction of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

Defra's updated advice tackles the question of what happens when an LNRS is introduced during the planning application process, especially after planning is accepted but before the BNG plan is submitted. Designers should contact local planning offices for guidance, what to do, and when.

Meanwhile, eight non-profit organisations and business groups have submitted an open letter to the Labour government, calling for the removal of exemption loopholes in BNG planning laws that allow some developers to opt out.

The letter, addressed to housing secretary Angela Rayner and environment secretary Steve Reed, outlines research by the Green Finance Institute which shows that only 0.5 per cent of total planning applications submitted since February 2024 have been subject to BNG regulations, largely due to developers exploiting the exemptions. The group is pressuring the government to address the issue, so it can deliver its legal commitments to halt species decline in Britain. [gov.uk](http://gov.uk)

## NEWS IN BRIEF

### AMBASSADOR ROLE FOR TITCHMARSH

Alan Titchmarsh has been appointed to the role of ambassador for English Heritage's Historic and Botanic Garden Training Programme (HBGTP), which provides paid traineeships for aspiring horticulturalists. Trainees work for a year alongside professional teams at some of the country's most important historic and botanic gardens. [english-heritage.org.uk](http://english-heritage.org.uk)

### NEW HTA PRESIDENT

The Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) has appointed Will Armitage as its new president, while Jane Lawler has been named vice-president. Mark Pitman, Managing Director of Wildlife World, and Mike Burks, Managing Director of The Gardens Group, are also joining the HTA Board. [hta.org.uk](http://hta.org.uk)

### BLAKEDOWN APPOINTS NEW MD

Chris Wellbelove has been appointed as the new managing director of award-winning landscaping, civil engineering and sports facility construction specialist Blakedown Landscapes. [blakedown.co.uk](http://blakedown.co.uk)

### RHS LAUNCHES PhD

The Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) is launching a new PhD focused on advancing peat-free plug plant production systems. The research doctorate is being funded through a collaboration between the RHS, the Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience, Coventry University, plug plant growers and growing media manufacturers. [rhs.org.uk](http://rhs.org.uk)

### SUSTAINABLE GARDENING GLOVES

The research team at the German Institutes of Textile and Fiber Research Denkendorf has developed a protective glove coating using biodegradable lignin, a natural component of plant cells. It is hoped that this will pave the way for more environmentally friendly waterproof gloves and other gardening products. [ditf.de/en](http://ditf.de/en)

## LANDFORM CONSULTANTS TO LAUNCH NEW INDUSTRY DESIGN AND LANDSCAPING HUB



**A NEW HUB** that will showcase a tailored collection of products by high-end manufacturers and suppliers to the design and landscaping industry is to open in Surrey next spring.

Housed within a reclaimed 1960s commercial glasshouse on half an acre of land in Chobham, The Glasshouse Collective (pictured) will feature garden buildings, sculpture, lighting, luxury furniture, stylish accessories and high-quality landscaping materials.

The hub is the brainchild of Mark Gregory, managing director of Landform Consultants, who commented: 'The Glasshouse Collective will also be a centre for learning, hosting seminars, industry debates and masterclasses and our creative and landscape designer Alan Williams is driving the project. He is curating the indoor and outdoor spaces and a date for the grand opening will be announced in the new year.' [@the.glasshouse.collective](http://the.glasshouse.collective)

## WHAT'S ON

For all SGD workshops, visit [sgd.org.uk](http://sgd.org.uk) – Events

**UNTIL 20 DECEMBER**  
**Exhibition: Pedestal Explorations**  
 This exhibition of American ceramicist Frances Palmer's work at The Garden Museum explores the pedestal form, such as footed vases, tulipières, and bowls.  
[gardenmuseum.org.uk](http://gardenmuseum.org.uk)

**5 DECEMBER**  
**Lecture: The historical and cultural importance of plants mentioned in the Qur'an**  
 This free online talk by Dr Shahina Ghazanfa will focus on plants mentioned in the Qur'an, their medicinal benefits and cultural importance.  
[obga.ox.ac.uk](http://obga.ox.ac.uk)

**6 DECEMBER**  
**BALI's National Landscape Awards**  
 The winners of BALI's Principal Awards and the Grand Award will be announced at JW Marriott Grosvenor House on Park Lane, London.  
[baliawards.co.uk/ceremony](http://baliawards.co.uk/ceremony)

**9 DECEMBER**  
**Talk: Rewilding Arcadia**  
 The London Gardens Trusts is hosting a talk on *21st-century Solutions to Manage Increasing Flood Risk along the River Thames* by Jason Debney, co-ordinator of the Thames Landscape Strategy.  
[londongardenstrust.org](http://londongardenstrust.org)

**10 DECEMBER**  
**Masterclass: Life after Leylandii!**  
 Matthew Pottage, Head of Horticulture at London Royal Parks, on the role of conifers.  
[gardenmasterclass.org](http://gardenmasterclass.org)



## TUNE IN TO ACRES WILD ON BBC GARDENERS' WORLD

**ARIT ANDERSON AND** the team from *BBC Gardeners' World* paid Debbie Roberts FSGD and Ian Smith FSGD of Acres Wild a visit earlier this year, during which they filmed a segment for the programme looking at Debbie and Ian's design of the garden (pictured) at the Acres Wild studio in West Sussex.

The programme, which aired on Friday 4 October, highlighted the challenges posed by the

sloping site and heavy clay soil. The designers also explained how they created privacy using 'borrowed' trees and mixed planting, and split the site into different zones, with a sunny Mediterranean garden close to the house, a perennial and English rose garden in the middle, and a Japanese-inspired scheme in the shade at the bottom of the plot.

The programme is available to view on iPlayer.

## ANN-MARIE POWELL FSGD TO REDESIGN GARDEN AT HAMPTON COURT PALACE

**IN A MOVE DESIGNED** to embrace more sustainable horticulture at Hampton Court Palace, Historic Royal Palaces has appointed Ann-Marie Powell FSGD and her team to revitalise the Great Fountain Garden.

Ann-Marie will work closely with the Palace's gardeners to design and implement a new, permanent year-round planting scheme featuring more perennials, naturalised bulbs and shrubs to reduce carbon emissions, improve soil health, and enhance biodiversity, while honouring the garden's rich history, which dates back to the 17th century, when it was created by William III and Mary II.

The design phase is already underway and changes to the gardens are expected to begin in the autumn of 2025.



The current planting (pictured) in the Great Fountain Garden at Hampton Court Palace will be updated by Ann-Marie Powell FSGD.



## BALI ANNOUNCES NEW BOARD MEMBER

**ADRIAN WICKHAM** (pictured), Managing Director, East at Glendale, has been appointed as the new national chair of the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI), and chartered landscape architect Matt Nokes as the new vice-chair. Adrian succeeds Tessa Johnstone and has said he will continue his work to open up the landscape industry, attracting more talent and making it more inclusive.

The organisation has also appointed five new board members, including Alistair Bayford, Managing Director of Frosts Landscape Construction; Kersten Catella, Wyevale Nurseries' Sales & Marketing Director; Mark Gregory, Managing Director of Landform Consultants; Paul Lynch, Managing Director of Elmtree Garden Contractors; and David Twist, Founder and CEO of Elite Landscapes. [bali.org.uk](http://bali.org.uk)

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The owners of Chippenham Hall, a Grade II-listed house in east Cambridgeshire, screened the solar panels in their garden using beech hedging.

to improve efficiency, together with advice on increasing insulation, and installing heating systems, and pumps and solar panels in the grounds, which may affect garden and landscape plans. The Note is free to download at [historicengland.org.uk](http://historicengland.org.uk).

## NEW ENERGY AND CARBON EFFICIENCY ADVICE FOR HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND LANDSCAPES

A **NEW ADVICE** Note has been released by Historic England regarding energy and carbon efficiency requirements when adapting historic buildings and landscapes.

The Note includes details on the permissions, such as listed building consent, needed for some of the common changes required

## DOBIES CELEBRATES 130 YEARS WITH PLANET MARK CERTIFICATION



AS THE **ONLINE** plant, seed, bulb, and gardening equipment supplier Dobies marks its 130th anniversary this year, it is also celebrating confirmation of its place as a leader in sustainability following receipt of a Planet Mark Certification.

The sustainability certificate acknowledges Dobies' commitment to the environment through initiatives such as growing all the

plants at its nursery (pictured) in Devon in 100 per cent peat-free compost and without the use of neonicotinoid pesticides that threaten pollinators.

Dobies' headquarters is also home to a worm farm that breaks down kitchen waste, and solar panels on its warehouse that contribute to the company's energy needs. [dobies.co.uk](http://dobies.co.uk)

## BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIP SET TO DELIVER THOUSANDS OF NEW HOMES

**THOUSANDS OF NEW** homes in England are set to be built on greenfield and brownfield sites over the next few years through a partnership that brings together Barratt Developments; Homes England, the government body responsible for housebuilding and regeneration; and Lloyds Banking Group.

Known collectively as the **MADE** Partnership, the group says it will act as master developer

for large-scale residential-led developments from 1,000 to more than 10,000 homes, along with a variety of community facilities and employment uses.

Its aim, it says, is to develop large development sites in urban or rural locations, 'masterplanning for sustainability, resilience, health, beauty, and nature', with landscaping and public realm infrastructure central to the schemes. [madepartnership.co.uk](http://madepartnership.co.uk)



Flavia Goldworthy, Ecological Planting Designer, in collaboration with ReShaped, delivered the award-winning Pollinator Project in Liverpool for the Urban GreenUP project.

## LIVERPOOL'S URBAN GREENUP IS OVERALL WINNER OF THE 2024 BIG BIODIVERSITY CHALLENGE AWARDS

A **PROJECT THAT** delivered 40 nature-based solutions in Liverpool, improving air quality, reducing flooding, enhancing biodiversity, and promoting active travel in the city, has been crowned Overall Winner in CIRIA's 2024 BIG Biodiversity Challenge Awards, while also taking home the Innovation Award.

The project brought together Liverpool City Council, Mersey Forest, the University of Liverpool, and other consultants, which worked together under the umbrella organisation Urban GreenUP to provide the new green spaces. The Pollinator Project, one of

the schemes that formed part of the plan, also won the Habitat Creation Project of the Year (Small Scale) Award. The success of Urban GreenUP is now being shared globally, inspiring similar efforts around the world.

Other winners included Joe Dance, Regional Ecology Director of Tyler Grange, who won the Biodiversity Champion Award, and the Oban Biodiversity Improvement Project by SGN, which received the Habitat Creation Project of the Year (Medium Scale) Award. For a list of winners and details of how to enter the 2025 awards, visit [bigchallenge.info](http://bigchallenge.info).

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# WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON?

Pre-registered SGD member Holly Birtles talks to **Zia Allaway** about her practice's regenerative landscape design for Oxygen House near Exeter, which has been shortlisted in the SGD Awards for 2025



Pre-registered SGD member Holly Birtles.

## HAVING ATTAINED

a BA (Hons) in Fine Art, Holly Birtles worked as a freelance artist and creative designer before going on to study landscape architecture at the University of Gloucestershire. She later gained her Chartership with the Landscape Institute while accruing experience at various

award-winning landscape practices in London and the south-west of Britain, and is a pre-registered member of the Society of Garden Designers (SGD). In 2018, she joined forces with fellow University of Gloucestershire alumnus and chartered landscape architect Jack Dilworth to set up their practice, PLAN Design.

## What is the background to this project?

Oxygen House is an award-winning building that is the headquarters of the technology, data, and analytics company Oxygen House Group and the team from our client, Grenadier Estates, which is the company's real estate arm, briefed us on the regenerative landscape it envisaged wrapping around the headquarters. At the moment, the site comprises a large car park in front of the building, all-weather pitches for sport, and a small productive garden. The client's ambitious plan was to convert the car park into a sustainable garden, with a solar array on the northern slope and a new car park with a solar canopy on the southern side.



## What was the brief?

The client team had consulted with Oxygen House employees and used the findings to write a detailed brief. This highlighted a desire for there to be means for carbon absorption, increasing biodiversity and wildlife habitats, improving soil quality, and storing and using rainwater while using reclaimed and low-carbon materials. We were appointed as the lead designer for the project but our main focus is the garden, the brief for which is to include a larger productive area to supply the company's restaurant kitchen, fruit trees and hedges to encourage foraging, a fitness trail and meandering walking routes, as well as a yoga deck, work pods for outdoor meetings, and a garden at the main entrance. The overall aim of the project is to help create a community spirit among the people who work at Oxygen House, and to offer lifestyle benefits that will encourage people back to the office after years of working at home.

## Tell us about your design concept

It creates a living system where nature and people fulfil equal roles and to the benefit of both. For example, gabion walls filled with a variety of recycled materials will edge the planting beds, providing habitats for insects and seats so workers can enjoy the flowers. Accessibility is also a key consideration, with paths on the sloping site following shallow gradients suitable for wheelchairs, pushchairs and cyclists. The productive area that is currently tucked behind the →



The masterplan for the gardens and wider landscape surrounding Oxygen House includes paths that follow the shallow gradients, helping to make the site fully accessible.

A row of trees with autumn foliage in a field under a blue sky. The trees are in various stages of autumn, with some leaves turning yellow and orange, while others remain green. The ground is covered with fallen leaves. The sky is a clear, bright blue. The overall scene is peaceful and scenic.

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3D concept renders showing the main entrance (below), and fully permeable paths leading through an area planted with a diverse selection of native trees (left) which includes some with fruits edible for people as well as birds and insects.

## 'GABION WALLS WILL EDGE THE BEDS, PROVIDING HABITATS FOR INSECTS AND SEATS FOR PEOPLE.'

building will form part of the main garden, while extensive new tree cover, drifts of wildflowers, and mixed hedgerows around the boundaries will capture carbon and provide foraging opportunities for wildlife and staff. We will also include bird and bat boxes, log piles, a rain garden basin and an hibernaculum and we have worked with ecology consultant EcoLogic to ensure the habitats are linked and will allow the migration of mammals through the site.

### Are the sustainable materials from local sources?

We have established relationships with local makers who use reclaimed materials but many of them are small businesses, and the challenge has been to source sufficient quantities to create a consistent palette of finishes to fulfil the desired aesthetic. The soil is currently a bit of an unknown as it is still covered with paving, but the prominent soil in the local areas is red in colour and found across the Devon Redlands; with a sandy texture, it is slightly acidic and free draining. We plan to crush the bricks to make up the subsoil, and to import new topsoil which will match the surrounding free-draining soil, so it matches the profile of the landscape beyond the boundary. We will repurpose existing materials such as pavers and we had hoped not to use any concrete but some has inevitably crept in for safety reasons.



### Tell us about the planting

Eighty to eighty-five per cent of the plants will be native species, with a wildlife meadow around the solar array to partly disguise it (panels will also be tucked behind the building). Wildflowers will also be planted in drifts to link with and continue the look within the main garden. A species-rich lawn will echo the meadow planting while the beds along the pathways will be augmented with ornamental flowering perennials and grasses to help sustain pollinators and birds throughout the year. The trees and boundary hedges have also been selected for their nectar-rich spring blossom and variety of fruits.

### How will the gardens be maintained?

The planting in the main garden will not require irrigation once it is established and general maintenance will be carried out by the groundskeeper, with additional support. An existing water tank beneath the car park will be used by the groundskeeper and kitchen staff who will care for the productive garden and, to minimise the carbon footprint, the garden and kitchen waste will be composted. At the client's request, we will also implement the Hügelkultur method for the productive planting beds.

### Is this project changing the way you design or work, and if so, in what ways?

It has encouraged us to think beyond established construction methods and to look for ways to limit intrusive excavations and minimise carbon intensive materials, such as concrete. It has also encouraged us to build closer relationships with smaller local fabricators and producers who can source reclaimed and recycled materials, rather than relying on some of the bigger suppliers with more rigid supply chains.

### Which elements of this design do you recommend all designers prioritise, to create resilient and environmentally responsible landscapes?

I feel that working with the client to enrich the brief, to fulfil their aspirations and help them to see the possibilities underpins the success of a project most. Decisions are also easier when there is a clear vision that all parties are enthusiastic about. ○

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# WHEN THE SHIP SAILS

Making a garden is a process, with each stage prompting the next. In which case, asks **John Wyer FSGD**, can a garden ever really be finished?

**A FEW YEARS** ago, at a pre-conference dinner, I was talking to some fellow garden designers and remarked on how much I had enjoyed visiting a garden they had designed. ‘We don’t talk about that project,’ they told me. I was puzzled and when I pushed them, they said it was because the project had gone in a direction with which they were uncomfortable.

The garden was initially private but open to the public, and was then taken over by the local community. I was fascinated by this. Whose project was it, in that case? And when is a garden finished?

These questions feel particularly pertinent at the moment as I am in the thick of ‘awards season’. Awards judges look at a finished garden but as above, what exactly is a ‘finished garden’?

In the case of the British Association of Landscape Industries’ Awards, ‘finished’ is defined as practical completion, but surely that is the beginning of a garden, not the end? The Society of Garden Designers takes a more flexible view, allowing gardens to be submitted as entries to its annual Awards any time after ‘completion’.

Of course, for practical reasons of time and access, the judging panels of both these big Awards competitions have to look at a garden as a snapshot, assessing its merits as these appear on the day they visit.

However, the fact is that a garden is a partnership between the designer, the client, and the gardener (who may also be the client). Sometimes the partnership goes on for many years, with the garden developing all the time.

I once likened designing a garden to building a boat. We design the boat, someone builds it, but where it sails and the adventures it has are up to the owner and its captain.

At the heart of this is the idea of garden-making as a process. Years ago, Vicky and I were showing an entrepreneur friend around the community garden with which we are involved. ‘When will it be finished?’ he asked. When we told him that it was not about being finished, it was about the process, he was completely flummoxed. ‘But how can it never be finished?’ This was a man who was used to Projects (with a capital ‘P’): plan, inputs, process, output, finished product, and move on to the next.

We explained that the whole point of the community garden is that people are personally involved in the process and therefore invested in the outcome. It is the process, however, that is most important and as different members

of the community drift in and out of the project, the garden will change and develop.

Of course, this is clear enough for a community garden; it will never be ‘finished’ in the dictionary sense of the word. What of the gardens that we designers make and hand over to a client, and how should we feel if the client changes our design though, even if it is a gradual process?

I know of gardens that have had several designers working on them over the years. At Winfield House, the official London residence of the US Ambassador to Britain, for instance, I recently re-walked its gardens with the retiring Head Gardener, Stephen Crisp. I had a particular interest in these 12 acres within Regent’s Park as during the 1980s, I had worked on them with the former president of the Landscape Institute, Sir Peter Shephard.

Before that, garden designer Peter Coats had laid out much of the site and Stephen showed how in some areas, the bones of both these men’s designs were still there, like the outlines of a room, but over the years had been reclothed. In other places, the original designs remained strong, and in some they had

melted away entirely. It was a fascinating insight into how a gardener can tend their charge over a period of time, long after the creator has left.

The questions surrounding the ‘finishing’ of a garden is a dilemma that is also faced by curators of historic gardens. Should these sites evolve or be kept frozen in a time? I worked with Peter Shephard on the gardens at Charleston in East Sussex, the country home where the Bloomsbury Set met in the early 20th century. Here, Mark Divall, who helped to restore the garden in 1985, went on to become its Head Gardener and married a member of the family. He was imbued with the place, and it with him.

If we look at the work of other head gardeners of famous gardens (Troy Scott Smith at Sissinghurst, or Fergus Garrett at Great Dixter, for example) they have an understanding not only of the essence of the place – the *genius loci* – but also of the intentions and spirit of the garden’s designer. The garden becomes a living thing. And like children, while gardens do not always turn out exactly as we expect, we are invested in them and want to be proud of them, nonetheless. ○

**WE DESIGN THE BOAT,  
SOMEONE BUILDS IT, BUT  
WHERE IT SAILS AND THE  
ADVENTURES IT HAS ARE UP TO  
THE OWNER AND ITS CAPTAIN.**



**John Wyer FSGD**

graduated from Manchester Metropolitan University with a degree in landscape architecture in 1983 and co-founded Bowles & Wyer in 1993. His extensive design portfolio spans private gardens to large-scale development projects, and many have won awards. He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Garden Designers (SGD) in 2011, and a Fellow of the Landscape Institute in 2020. As well as continuing to take a lead role in Bowles & Wyer, and to serve as vice-chair and treasurer of the SGD, he lectures in Britain and abroad and writes a monthly blog, exploring the design process and role of landscape and maintenance. [bowleswyer.co.uk](http://bowleswyer.co.uk)

**IS A GARDEN EVER FINISHED?** I would love to hear your thoughts. Email me via [gdj@jamespembrokedia.co.uk](mailto:gdj@jamespembrokedia.co.uk)

# FRONT LINES

A zig-zag wall, low-level planting, and a row of staggered trees for screening are key to the enduring appeal of this contemporary garden by the Edinburgh-based designer Tracy McQue MSGD

WORDS: Caroline Donald; PHOTOGRAPHS: Ray Cox





LED striplighting fitted along the bottom edges on both sides of the zig-zag wall create a gentle glow across what was formerly a box-edged lawn (below).



### Tracy McQue MSGD

began her working life with a career in IT before deciding to study garden design at the Scottish Agricultural College. She established her Edinburgh-based practice in 2007 and, as well as making city gardens, she is currently working on several large landscape design projects, including one for 180 loch-side acres in the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. She is a member of the Society of Garden Designers, and currently serves on its Council, as the Society's Technical lead.

[mcquegardens.com](http://mcquegardens.com)

It is not often that the Edinburgh-based designer Tracy McQue MSGD is given carte blanche for a garden. It is even rarer for a front garden, but here the only remit was that the path to the front door and driveway should be kept, and some sort of light screening established so passers-by could not gawp through the large windows of the owners' Georgian house.

'The rest was "Just do what you fancy",' says Tracy. 'Initially, it was a bit puzzling to be set such an open brief. With plenty of space around the house, they didn't need the usual practicalities like a bin store.'

The existing front garden was laid to lawn, with box parterres and tired old shrubs, a traditional design that chimed with others in the conservation area wherein the house is situated. The clients were a young couple who had just moved to Edinburgh and were redoing the house in a contemporary style and wanted the garden to reflect this approach.

'They didn't want a lawn; they're very design-savvy and wanted something they could walk through that would be interesting,' says Tracy. 'I came up with five different concepts, which I don't often do, but they had set me such an open brief it became like a piece of art rather than a practical design. They picked a design that was quite organic; it wasn't really anything, just shapes, but it became swathes of plants. They were happy for these to be mainly perennials.'

This very much fits in with Tracy's ethos. 'The way that I look at design, I assume that the space will be fully planted, and I have to justify very carefully the areas of existing planting I remove to put in hardscape.'

So, a large, gnarly ash tree stayed, any plants that were in good condition were either given away or transposed to the back garden, and no skip was needed. The soil was good, so there was no need to bring in any



more, and the London Stone pavers that line the path and the setts to the driveway were retained, though Tracy admits that were she to have the opportunity to revisit this, she would have a gravel drive. As it was, a constraint imposed by the city's planners was that there should be no run-off from the garden into the drainage system and the water has to be captured on site. 'That is why it is so full of plants,' she explains.

### STAGGERED SCREENING

With the preferred concept's emphasis on low-level planting, and a budget at the time of around £35,000 to £40,000, the main challenge was how to screen the house without putting up a fence or using hedging. 'We ended up putting in a staggered line of multi-stemmed *Amelanchier*,' says Tracy. 'They weave their way through the planting and, when you look out from the house, they cover pretty much the entire frontage. Even though they are not evergreen, in winter, their skeletons are enough to create an impression of not being looked at too much.'

The garden took about four weeks to build and matured very quickly. It starts off the year in a burst →

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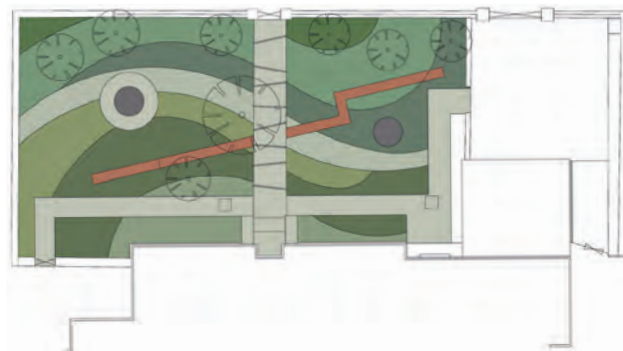
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Of the five concepts that Tracy showed them, the clients like the organic shapes of this 2D design (far right) best. Any hardscaping has to work hard to justify its place in her work (given the opportunity, she would probably use all gravel instead of paving for the paths) but the decision to include the pair of water bowls was both wildlife-friendly and artistic.

of brilliant green growth from the perennials, with purple and white alliums such as *Allium* 'Forelock' and *Allium* 'Silver Spring' hovering above. By high summer, the whole space is covered in ribbons of colour and structure: *Rudbeckia fulgida* var. *sullivantii* 'Goldsturm', *Eryngium* × *zabelii* 'Jos Eijking', *Helenium* 'Moerheim Beauty' and *Echinacea purpurea* 'White Swan' among them, their strong form punctuated by grasses such as *Molinia caerulea* subsp. *caerulea* 'Moorhex' and *Deschampsia cespitosa*. In winter, before they get too battered by the Scottish rains, the plants provide lots of structure. 'When we get a heavy frost, everything looks as if it's been dusted in spun sugar,' says the owner.

#### ORNAMENTAL FEATURES

It is during these early months of the year, when the exuberant planting has died back, that the few pieces of hard landscaping that Tracy has put in come into their own: two shallow Corten steel water bowls and a low, rendered block wall that zig-zags across the space, a shape that the designer included in her original conceptual plan without knowing what concrete form it would eventually take. The bottom of the wall is slightly recessed and here Tracy has integrated LED lights that wash the form with a gentle glow.

The owners have experimented with different paint colours for the wall but have reverted to the original taupe to match the path. It is a popular spot, not least with the cats often found basking there in the sunshine.

They are not the only fans. Being in a front garden, the wall forms a part of a painterly tableau that is shared with those who pass by as well as with the visitors who walk through it.

'Initially, when people saw us taking plants out, there was quite a lot of concern but in the end, they loved it,' says the owner. Nearly 10 years on, albeit with a few tweaks here and there, where plants have not thrived or have been so comfortable they have spread outside their bounds, the garden still looks impressive and pleasing. So much so, says the owner, 'People have changed the routes they use to take their children to school so they can come past the garden. The design Tracy came up with really is standing the test of time.' ○

## WHO'S WHO

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# MAIN AWARDS THE SHORTLIST

Ahead of the announcement of who has won what on 7 February next year, we take a look at all those gardens that have been selected by the judging panel as finalists in the Main Awards categories of the 2025 SGD Awards.

WORDS: Arabella St John Parker

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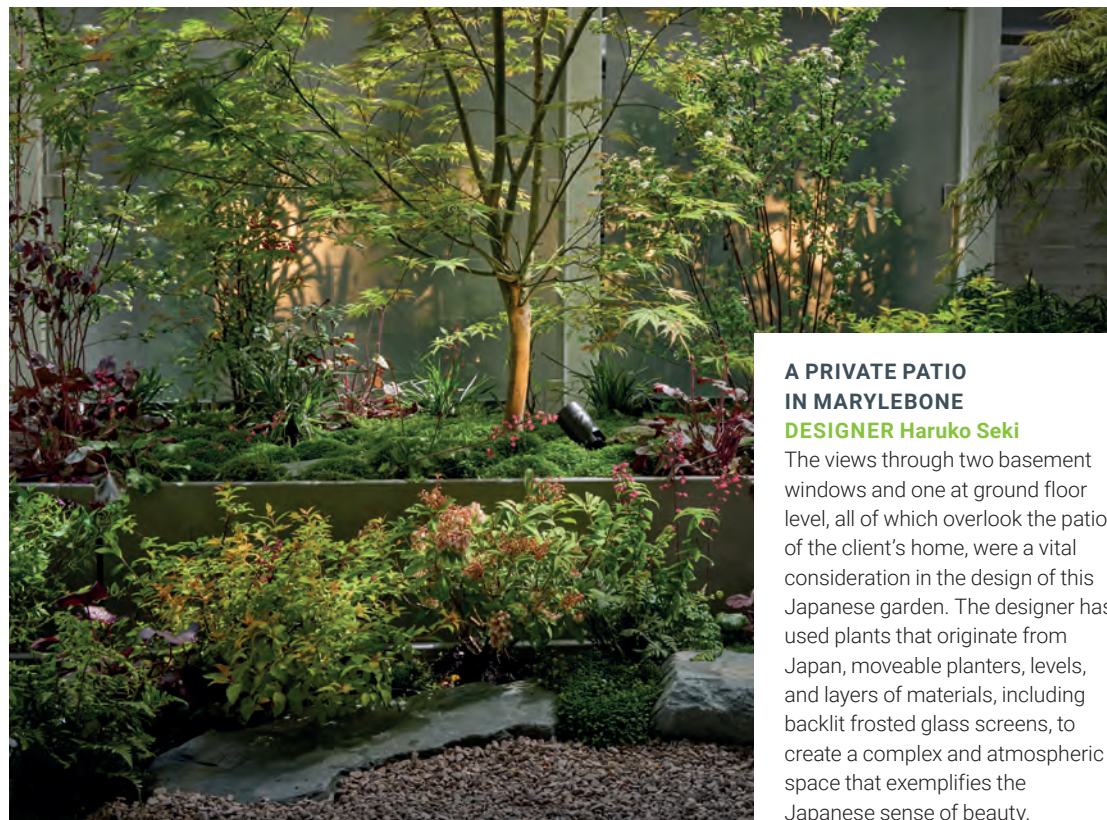
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### A PRIVATE PATIO IN MARYLEBONE

DESIGNER Haruko Seki

The views through two basement windows and one at ground floor level, all of which overlook the patio of the client's home, were a vital consideration in the design of this Japanese garden. The designer has used plants that originate from Japan, moveable planters, levels, and layers of materials, including backlit frosted glass screens, to create a complex and atmospheric space that exemplifies the Japanese sense of beauty.





**AFTER THE TRANSHUMANCE**

**DESIGNER Moss Studio, principle designer Barbara Samitier MSGD**

For this site, which the client intends to use to raise an income from eco and wellness tourism, the designer has, with the client, been led by the landscape to see how and where best to apply human activities such as places to sit, swim, gather, exercise, talk, eat, and walk. A light touch approach has been applied to the layout, and materials – a key part of the eco and wellness experience – are locally sourced to inextricably link the garden with the area’s agricultural roots and craftsmanship.

**CLEAVER STREET**

**DESIGNER Adolfo Harrison MSGD**

A sterile back garden, overlooked by mixed housing on all sides and lacking any notable planting save one mature tree, has been transformed into a secret outdoor living space complete with a working fireplace in the seating area, a fully equipped drinks bar and a book-lined library, and with climbers and wall shrubs, green roofs and a general sense of nature scrambling and taking over.



**A TAPESTRY OF URBAN GREENERY**

**DESIGNER Stefano Marinaz Landscape Architecture, principle designer Stefano Marinaz MSGD**

A broad expanse of certified sustainable concrete slabs running through the centre of this long, narrow east-facing garden is arranged with staggered edges that bleed into the planting beds on both sides, to maximise the absorption of rainwater. The wandering path also heightens the sense of journey through the naturalistic planting that creates cocooning areas for seating and dining.

**BLUE GARDEN**

**DESIGNER Tabi Jackson Gee, pre-registered SGD member**

Artificial grass, empty pots, and rundown garden furniture were originally all the client could see from inside their flat. Now, invertebrate and pollinator-friendly planting, with a predominance of plants with seedheads that can be left over winter and evergreen groundcover, furnish a layout that functions as an outdoor dining room in summer. The gloomy, enclosed backyard has been transformed into a beautiful haven of nature in the city.





**ECHOES OF THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

**DESIGNER Eliza Gray MSGD**

To create a safe place for children to play, and that is sympathetic to the 18th-century terraced cottage behind which it lies, the design for this listed garden needed to address a four-metre drop between levels, uneven surfaces and crumbling steps. It also needed to manage a lack of any safety railings and find a way of introducing modern design elements that will not damage the garden's historic materials or jar with its industrial past, and which are either reused pieces or small format and locally sourced. Plants needed to be small specimens and some have been grown from seed by the clients.

**FOLLY GARDEN**

**DESIGNER Claire Greener, pre-registered SGD member**

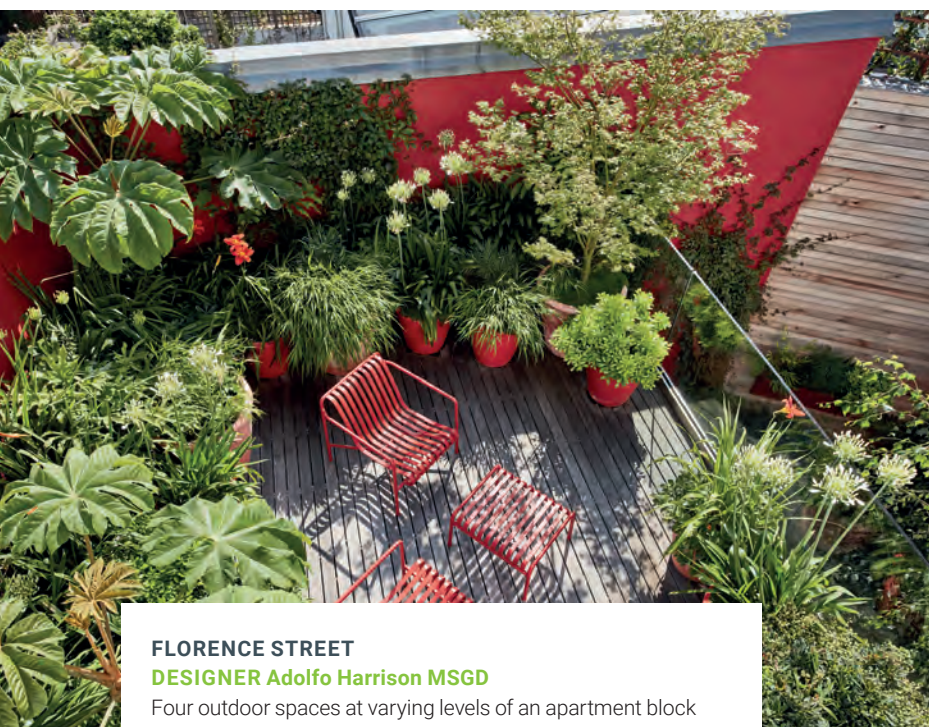
Any evidence of the chicken sheds that previously stood on this site have been erased by a series of new spaces arranged over recontoured slopes and featuring 60 newly planted trees, 132 metres of native hedging and 3,400 square metres of grassland and wildflower meadow, to act as a setting for the new Folly, and link it with the main house, its gardens and a wooded dell.



**NATURALISTIC NEW-BUILD GARDEN**

**DESIGNER Emily Crowley-Wroe, pre-registered SGD member**

The lawn behind the client's newly built home has been replaced by a raised seating deck and dining terrace settled into planting chosen to echo the meadow beyond the garden boundary. A pair of multi-stemmed *Elaeagnus umbellata* screen an electricity pylon and shed from view as well as help restore the soil damaged during the building of the house.



**FLORENCE STREET**

**DESIGNER Adolfo Harrison MSGD**

Four outdoor spaces at varying levels of an apartment block have been transformed into individual gardens that together function rather like a forest. Each site is planted according to its position within a natural forest, from woodland floor to tree canopy. The designs vary according to use and needed to accommodate a number of site-specific artworks and reuse existing restored planters and timber decking and trellising.





**EDGY WOODLAND WONDERLAND**

**DESIGNER** Stefano Marinaz Landscape Architecture,  
**principle designer** Stefano Marinaz MSGD

A postage stamp of lawn has been transformed into a woodland edge garden. Multi-stem ginkgo, flowering cherry and pine trees filter light and mimic the canopy of a natural wood above organically shaped beds planted with grasses chosen to suppress weeds and retain moisture, perennials, and a selection of self-seeders such as *Viola labradorica* and *Lunaria annua*.

**HESTIA GARDEN AT THE PLOUGH, SHIPLAKE**

**DESIGNER** Tabitha Rigden, pre-registered SGD member

A series of semi-private garden dining spaces, set among beds of colourful and textural perennials and grasses, is arranged on the footprint of the car park, which has been relocated behind a new plantation of trees and native hedging that also helps to screen the new garden from traffic and nearby housing. The client asked that the design include a wood-fired outdoor kitchen and chef's table, and a sociable seating and play area, while new entrances leading from the pub and the new car park into the garden needed to be addressed and made fully accessible.



**SET IN STONE**

**DESIGNER** Peter Berg, pre-registered SGD member

A project to create a garden on a steeply sloping site that would shield a contemporary home being built at the same time from the road and neighbouring buildings, and showcase its spectacular views of the valley. Slow-growing, high-quality trees and locally sourced sawn basalt were key requests in the client's brief.



**ISLE OF WIGHT GARDEN**

**DESIGNER** Andy Sturgeon FSGD

A complex array of crib lock retaining walls has been used to transform this vertiginous north-facing site that rises up sharply from the road immediately beside the church and which hugs the client's Modernist-style house on both sides. Behind the walls is a plant-rich garden that the client can now access and enjoy while hidden from the view of passers-by below.

Photographs: (opposite, clockwise from top left) Eliza Gray, Anthony Coleman, Emily Crowley-Wroe, Mischa Haller, (this page, clockwise from top left) Alister Thorpe, Alister Thorpe, Marianne Majerus, Rachel Waine



### A CONTEMPORARY COTTAGE GARDEN

**DESIGNER** Adam Vetere MSGD

A gently sloping garden that has been reworked to create an affinity with the clients' modernised cottage and a sense of place within the wider semi-rural landscape. It needed to feel more secluded from the street at the front, and from walkers on the footpath that runs along its southern boundary. Drawing on the clients' experiences of living on the English coast and in Scandinavia, the design includes distinctive features such as a Swedish sauna with outdoor shower, and large slices of rock rising up out of a reflective pool that bridges the formal planted and terraced areas close to the house and the wider, more naturalistic landscape that is planted as a 21st-century English cottage garden.



### OXYGEN HOUSE GARDEN – SOLARFLORA

**DESIGNER** Holly Birtles, pre-registered SGD member

The designer was invited to create a garden that will enhance the working environment of the employees of Oxygen House, providing them with walks through wildflower meadows, opportunities to grow and care for vegetables and fruit, places to eat, work and hold meetings and events outside, and for the garden to exemplify best practice in silviculture, ecology, permaculture and sustainable design. (To find out more about this garden, turn to page 17 of this issue of the *Journal*.)



### PARSONAGE FARM

**DESIGNERS** Paul Kimberley and Sumina Rutrecht, pre-registered SGD members

An elegant intervention was required to update the swimming pool area and link it in a sympathetic manner with the wider, more traditional garden and create a new space for the client and their family to use for entertaining. A parterre-style garden with a pergola to shade the new garden dining room acts as the junction between the new deck-level pool and the retained section of the garden, while hedging that previously hid the old pool from the main garden has been opened up to the lawns and a new arrangement of ornamental hedges beyond.

### PRIMROSE HILL COURTYARD

**DESIGNERS** Lucy Conochie and Jane Heather, pre-registered SGD members

A colourful feature wall and a mixture of large-scale plants, evergreens and seasonally colourful plants in oversized pots, all ably supported by the borrowed landscape of park trees beyond, have turned this high-walled garden into a smart yet relaxed extension of the client's interior spaces, with natural and manmade light to adjust the ambience at will.





**WILDLIFE RAIN GARDEN**

**DESIGNER Sally Bower, pre-registered SGD member**

The garden behind the client's bungalow, originally a muddled mixture of pots and plants, has been revitalised with a design that celebrates the site's location, at the edge of a mature wood. A tapestry of plant communities, including an edible forest garden, wildlife habitats, and connected SuDS elements, supports biodiversity and links the garden with its wider surroundings as well as providing the clients and their family with places in which they can potter, grow their own food, eat and entertain.

**RIVER DART VIEW**

**DESIGNER Tom Johnson, pre-registered SGD member**

This design works with the gentle undulations of the site that falls away from what will be the client's newly built home overlooking the River Dart. Paths are cut through wildflower meadow and grassland and run past native hedging to reach a wildlife pond and sustainably built outdoor living complex that includes seating and dining areas, a hot tub and a swimming pool.



**ST MARY'S PEACE GARDEN**

**DESIGNER McWilliam Studio, principle designer Gavin McWilliam MSGD**

The design for this tranquil and sustainable peace garden, which sits beside and slightly below the level of the school playground, is a sensitive distillation of the pupils' own designs for their school garden. With naturalistic, drought-tolerant planting in gravel, boulder seats, and stepping stones, each of which is carved with the name of a classroom, the garden is an oasis of calm, offering shelter whilst maintaining visibility for all the children to enjoy within the busy school environment.

**ST PAUL'S ROAD**

**DESIGNER Adolfo Harrison MSGD**

In response to the client's wish for a garden that would complement her new kitchen extension, and be a place of escape, inspiration and for entertaining, the designer has created a lost city found within the garden. Hardy, tropical-style planting appears to run rampant, clambering over 'architectural remains' in the form of metal arches and round-topped timber fencing, and blurring the pathway through the compact space to create a sense of journey and enclosure through and around the garden.



Photographs: (Opposite, clockwise from top left) Ellie Waipole, Holly Birrites, Rachel Warne, Rob Irving (This page, clockwise from top left) Sally Bower, Gro Designs, Mischa Haller, Alister Thorpe



**THE DAIRY HOUSE**

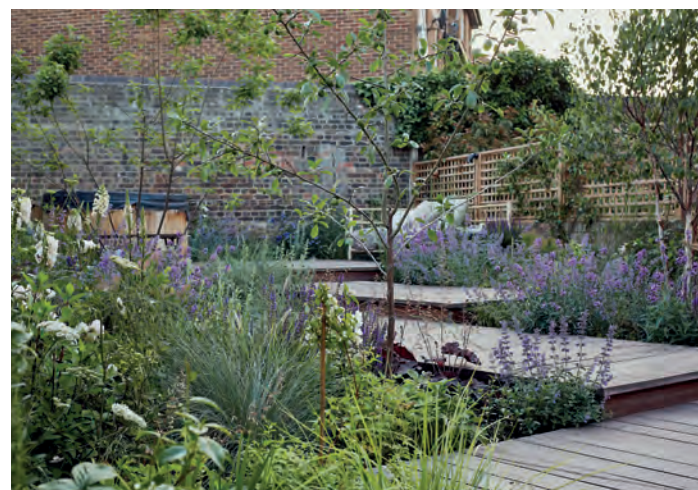
**DESIGNER Robert Hughes MSGD**

Three terraces boldly arranged across the gradient, using a stylish mixture of natural materials and surrounded by deep borders planted with grasses, colourful perennials and bulbs, trees and shrubs give this garden the ideal arrangement of platforms for year-round easy, connected and contemporary-style outdoor living.

**THE WALLED GARDEN, NORFOLK**

**DESIGNER Charlotte Sanderson, pre-registered SGD member**

A new walled garden has been built in front of an 18th-century red-brick farmhouse with Dutch gable ends, on a site that was previously laid to lawn. Family and friends can entertain on the dining and firepit terraces, or explore and potter along the wide paths that separate the square Corten-steel-edged beds planted with specimen trees, flowering perennials and seasonal bulbs, fruit trees, roses, lavender, grasses and herbaceous perennials.



**ZERO LANDFILL GARDEN**

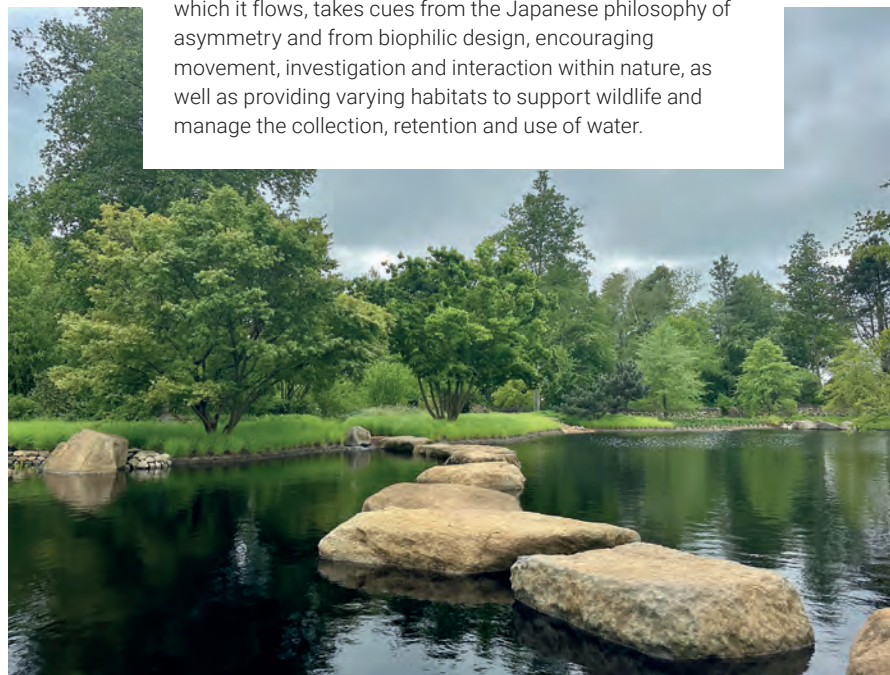
**DESIGNER Miria Harris MSGD**

For a modern take on a cottage garden, a tapestry of native and non-native plants, including quintessential roses and delphiniums, is arranged along a boardwalk that stretches the full length of the garden, culminating in a deck where the client and her children can rest and socialise surrounded by the sensory, wildlife- and pet-friendly planting. To lessen the impact of creating the new garden, all the plants in the existing garden were given away and unwanted hard landscaping was gifted, recycled or reused; any new elements, such as the decking and fencing, were built using reclaimed materials.

**GARDEN IN OXFORDSHIRE**

**DESIGNER Sarah Eberle FSGD**

To create this Anglo-Japanese strolling garden as a sanctuary for the client, water, paths and rock have been artfully combined with planting so they coalesce to make an environment that inspires contemplation, peace and meditation. The design, as with that of the new house around which it flows, takes cues from the Japanese philosophy of asymmetry and from biophilic design, encouraging movement, investigation and interaction within nature, as well as providing varying habitats to support wildlife and manage the collection, retention and use of water.







### HAMPSHIRE TEMPLE

**DESIGNER** McWilliam Studio, principle designer Gavin McWilliam MSGD

The designer and his studio were invited to create a landscape that would bring together in a coherent natural setting the various geographical and architectural elements of an area of land within the South Downs National Park, with a new temple designed by James Gorst Architects at its heart. The design needed to follow sacred geometry such as chakras or circles, as well as the site's natural axes and levels, in direct contrast and counterpoint to the natural landscape. It also needed to implement set coloured planting palettes and address existing issues such as poor visual and physical links with the wider parkland, and access for vehicles.

### THE EMBRACE OF NATURE

**DESIGNER** Tawatchai Sakdikul, pre-registered SGD member

The client wanted their garden to be an extension of their internal living spaces, with a freestanding living room, tea pergola and a dining terrace within a naturalistically planted gravel garden that flows around three sides of the client's home. Tall trees and tropical plants chosen to thrive in the local climate are used to soften, shade and anchor the structures within the wider landscape.



### SUFFOLK WALLED GARDEN

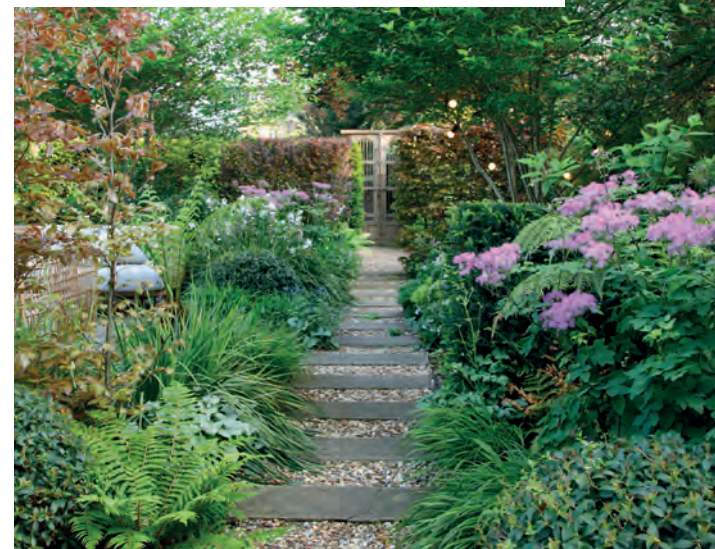
**DESIGNER** Colm Joseph, pre-registered SGD member

A timber-clad home, built within a heritage red-brick-walled garden, is given context, privacy and scope for outdoor living by a design of interconnected spaces with planting and features inspired by the site's original purpose and its environs. Notably, in the front garden, a thick plantation of tall ornamental grasses punctuated by columns of clipped beech draws on images of local reed beds and traditional topiary gardens.

### UNDER THE COPPER BEECH

**DESIGNER** Moss Studio, principle designer Barbara Samitier MSGD

What was originally a patch of lawn lying between a skateboard ramp, compost and outdoor gym at one end and a terrace close to the house has been refashioned into a woodland idyll for people and wildlife. Comfortable seating on a platform of oak sleepers is nestled into the embrace of deep mixed borders shaded by multi-stemmed *Crataegus prunifolia*, while blocks of *Berberis thunbergii* and *Fagus sylvatica*, backstopped by an old Indian gate, screen the sports equipment and a tortoise run from view.





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**SOUTH LONDON GARDEN**  
**DESIGNER George Cullis**  
**MSGD**

The classic combination of lawn and terracing, with enough space for children to knock a ball around safely in the former and room for a dining table to seat eight to 10 people in the latter, is given a 21st-century treatment with a naturalistic planting of low-maintenance natives and non-natives chosen to peak in spring and autumn particularly, and robust enough to withstand the impact of stray footballs.

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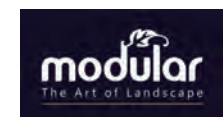
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Landscape designer and Talking Plants co-founder Amy Langron (inset) has been given free rein to trial plants at this garden in Coal Aston.

# NORTHERN LIGHTS

The horticulture industry in Yorkshire is thriving. Pre-registered SGD member **Darryl Moore** meets the key figures within a growing community of garden and landscape professionals who are working together for a greener future

**T**he idea of community can take several forms, from a group of people living in a particular area, to those who share a sense of identity, common profession, or interests. A convergence of all these has occurred in Yorkshire in the past few years, with an incredibly dynamic and forward-thinking community of garden and landscape professionals coming together to create a self-supporting network and use enterprising ways to develop a sustainable local horticulture industry.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this community has found a nexus in Sheffield, which for some time has been a leader in the field of ecological horticulture. The University

of Sheffield in particular has for decades delivered groundbreaking research, from the likes of bioscientists Professor David Read and Professor J Philip Grime, and urban ecologist and lichenologist and a reader in landscape ecology, Oliver Gilbert, to the more recent work of horticultural ecologist Professor Emeritus James Hitchmough and botanist Professor Nigel Dunnett, who have literally taken ideas developed within the Department of Landscape Architecture out on to the streets.

## PUBLIC REALM

One of those ideas, the Grey to Green scheme, has become an internationally

recognised landmark in the city, showcasing urban resilience and regeneration and setting new standards for public realm planting. A large-scale SuDS scheme, it is a collaboration between Sheffield City Council and the Department of Landscape Architecture, with the planting design by Nigel Dunnett, and Zac Tudor, an associate landscape architect at Arup.

Specialist substrates and plants were supplied by The Green Estate, a Community Interest Company (CIC) established in 2003 in Sheffield with a mission to grow green and resilient urban places where people and nature can thrive. Since its establishment, the CIC has turned →

## INSIDE TRACK

103.7 acres of derelict land and buildings into a unique and sustainable landscape featuring parks, community facilities, and trial beds that are used by current and past university researchers, including James Hitchmough and garden designer and writer Noel Kingsbury.

The Green Estate is also responsible for Pictorial Meadows, the groundbreaking seed and turf company that was originally established in collaboration with Nigel.

### SOCIAL EVENTS

The legacy of these precedents is evident in the burgeoning scene of garden professionals who have coalesced around Talking Plants, a regular event established in Sheffield for like-minded souls with a passion for learning about plants and to experiment with them in their work. Featuring an ongoing series of talks by local and visiting speakers, alongside plant identification sessions and opportunities for socialising and networking, the gathering facilitates connections and collaborations between a younger generation of designers, gardeners and plantspeople.

Talking Plants was born when landscape designers Will Tomson and Amy Langron met at a party at Sheffield University and found they both had mutual interests and a desire to organise an event. Since beginning in April 2022, attendance has grown steadily, with a recent move to a larger venue testament to the strength of the community to which it has given birth.

Amy believes that the people who come along to the talks connect because it is accessible. 'We felt that a lot of events are expensive, attract the same crowd, and often the same speakers, so we decided to establish a series of social evenings, keep the ticket price low, have a student rate, and hold it in the evening so that professionals could come. Somewhere that had a bar and a relaxed atmosphere, so people would stay, chat, and make friends.'

The strategy has paid off, says Will. 'Now, there are a lot of people who are connected, encouraging each other and able to see what everyone is doing. The main thing is the camaraderie rather than competition; it feels like everyone is helping each other out,' he continues. 'Nurseries and designers are working together and sharing ideas. There are also quite a lot of younger people joining in as well.'

### TRIALLING PLANTS

Both Will and Amy consider this last point encouraging as they feel that those starting out in their careers often lack access to gardens where they can develop their skills

and ideas. It is a challenge Amy herself faced for many years, but which she solved by borrowing a garden located in Coal Aston, where she has permission from the owner to do as she wishes. After clearing the neglected space, she now trials plants there, with an eye to their performance, and is currently looking at the different long-term effects of planting in blocks and with looser, informal mixes.

Amy studied landscape architecture in Sheffield before working in practices in London and Sheffield. As well as organising the Talking Plants evenings, she is a co-director of the landscape design practice Hortus Collective, alongside Mark Rogers, who is based in East Sussex, and together they work on a range of private gardens and public projects. Having the garden in Coal



Landscape designer and Talking Plants co-founder Will Tomson practises an ecological approach at his garden in Penistone.



'THE MAIN THING IS THE CAMARADERIE RATHER THAN COMPETITION; IT FEELS LIKE EVERYONE IS HELPING EACH OTHER OUT.'

**LEFT:** Arcadia is an experimental garden on the outskirts of Sheffield that showcases an ecological approach to planting. **RIGHT:** another key player in the Sheffield scene, Owen Hayman, has transformed a borrowed hillside plot in Langsettle into a living plant catalogue.

Aston is important, she explains, 'particularly for our projects in Sheffield and further north. It's really useful to know which plants do well and which struggle; some that we use in our southern projects are not happy with the wet and cold up here. Also, I can trial plant combinations, see how they work together and learn from any errors – a lot of the things that have gone wrong have been the most useful.'

Understanding how plants fit with their locations is also key to Will's work. After studies in ecology and a placement on the TRIAD Great Gardens of the World Fellowship programme that was set up by the National Trust at Hidcote Manor, Longwood in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, America, and the Alliance of Hyogo on Awaji Island, Japan, followed by work in Scotland with Chris Beardshaw, he established his design and build company Creative Cultivation in Sheffield, to undertake a range of residential projects.

A light-touch, ecologically informed approach defines his work, which can be evidenced in his own garden in Penistone, where dense naturalistic planting surrounds a natural pond and everything in the garden caters for all life stages of as many insects as possible.

Establishing his own contractor team has allowed Will to minimise the impact and inputs of his projects. 'In nearly every case, we're using local stone or the stone that we dig up, locally sourced larch cut specifically for the project, and wood chips or gravel and sand from the local quarry. Very rarely will I buy new paving,' he says.

### GROWING NETWORKS

Local networks are important to Will's design process; he works with students and graduates from the university and from pre-registered SGD member Alistair Baldwin's Yorkshire School of Garden Design, and he also collaborates with Becky Crowley, a former cut-flower grower at Chatsworth.

He also has an ambition to start an apprenticeship scheme 'for young people coming out of school, to build the gardens that we're designing. They could help and learn about sustainable construction, landscaping, and ecological planting so that they can go on to set up their own businesses.'



## 'THIS GROWING ENERGY IN THE REGION ENABLES YOU TO FEEL CONFIDENT ECONOMICALLY TO START YOUR OWN ENTERPRISE AND TAKE A CHANCE.'

Katy Merrington was the inaugural speaker for Talking Plants and she has since become an important part of that venture. After studying fine art at university, she completed RHS Level 2 before spending time at various large gardens. This combined background has placed her well for her role as Cultural Gardener at the Hepworth Gallery in Wakefield, starting in 2019.

The multifunctional post involves maintaining the garden to make sure it grows according to designer Tom Stuart-Smith OBE FSGD's vision and functions as a natural resource for the gallery's events and learning teams, hosting activities and talks, and handling visitor engagement.

Through this work, Katy says she has seen an increased interest in gardening and believes it to be a reaction against social disenchantment. 'People have started to see gardening as a radical act of care,' she says. 'After the pandemic, the idea of care became a positive action. The world feels like it's spinning out of control, and people are asking "What can I do?"'

The groundswell of activity in Sheffield is inspiring, she says. 'Because there's been this growing energy and sense of other things happening in the region, it enables you to feel confident economically to start your own enterprise and take a chance.'

Another key player in the Sheffield scene is Owen Hayman, whose background, which includes a Masters in Environmental Science and an RHS Level 4 qualification from RHS Garden, Wisley, is fused with an unbridled passion for plants and an encyclopaedic horticultural knowledge.

Like Amy, Owen gardens on a borrowed plot, a hillside walled garden in Langsettle, which he has transformed into a living plant catalogue with rare and familiar species woven into a densely layered array of forms, flowers and textures, which has evolved over the last seven years of expert care.

When not indulging in the floral delights of the allotment, Owen is busy as the Landscape Manager at The Green Estate. There, he is currently involved in the next phase of Grey to Green, and he is also working on another large-scale SuDS project, this one in Mansfield, in partnership with the city council and Arup, and involving the creation of rain gardens and bioswales across the town. Initial planting carried out in 2023 is already well established and it is transforming the public realm in a dramatic manner. →

## NEW NURSERIES

Sheffield's evident overarching focus on plants is further fuelled by a new generation of nurseries in the north

The new nurseries in the region are united by their owners' passion to bring sustainably grown, interesting plants to a regional market that is accustomed to more traditional horticulture. The range of plants these nurseries work with is wide and defies the usual tasteful selections of much current design and gardening, focusing instead on unusual hardy perennial species.

With so many older nurseries being closed, the work being done by this new cohort is important for the future of the independent nursery industry and the mutual support they offer each other is reassuring as they face formidable challenges, literally starting their endeavours from the ground up and trying to change mindsets.

Among them is **Cliff Bank Nursery**, a neglected nursery in North Ripton that Ben Preston reopened in the spring of 2023 after a year of hard renovation work with his partner Laura Kennedy, following their departure from York Gate in 2022.

Propagator Henrietta Huntley trained at Beth Chatto's Gardens and began **Freckles and Flora** in Thirsk in early 2024. The nursery is situated on land she is renting from her parents and its plant list reveals her penchant for American prairie plants and umbellifers, with an impressive array of hard-to-find species.

After stints at Beth Chatto's Gardens and Great Dixter, Dean Charlton returned home to Rotherham last May to join forces with his father and take on the lease of a former nursery owned by the Wentworth Woodhouse estate. The site had a lot of existing nursery infrastructure but needed a serious upgrade and after much hard graft, **Hooton's Walled Nursery** opened to the public in March this year, with stock that appeals to connoisseurs and novices alike.

A unifying theme of the nurseries is that their protagonists have studied and worked in gardens elsewhere in the country and are keenly aware of the importance of returning to the north with their skills. As Henrietta acknowledges, 'A lot of people have trained down south because there are not the same facilities and gardens up here...they have brought their training back with them, which is a movement of ideas that is needed to avoid stagnation.'

'We need to bring our expertise back to this area,' agrees Dean. 'I really do believe this region is up and coming now.' He hopes that the new RHS Show at Wentworth Woodhouse in 2025 will generate news about Yorkshire and add to the growing awareness of the county as a leading location for horticulture.



Hooton's Walled Nursery.

Growing from seed, cuttings and propagation is common to all the new nurseries, as is ensuring the plants they sell are well suited to the regional conditions. 'Propagating and trialling them to know exactly what the plant does in different conditions is important,' says Ben. 'With each generation, they'll become slightly more adapted to this climate.'

All the nursery keepers harbour ambitions to sell bare-root stock in the near future, to help reduce impacts on the local environment. They are also very conscious that they need to tailor their prices to suit the local market.

With an eye already on the future, they are making plans to pass on

their skills to the next generation too. At Cliff Bank, Ben hopes to set up a two-year combined nursery and garden traineeship so participants can learn how to maintain and how to propagate plants. 'I think the academic study alongside practical horticulture is important,' he says, adding, 'If you're not training people, that knowledge just goes to the grave.'

Dean has a similar plan for Hooton's, working in collaboration with the Wentworth Woodhouse estate. 'It would be amazing to see a nursery traineeship here,' he says. 'And we can offer subsidised accommodation as the estate owns a lot of the cottages in the village.'



Ben and his partner Laura Kennedy reopened Cliff Bank in North Ripton in the spring of 2023.



Ben Preston of Cliff Bank Nursery.





Tom Nicholls, Senior Gardener at York Gate, right.

### EXPERIMENTAL GARDENS

Arcadia is an experimental garden on the outskirts of Sheffield and an important touchstone for the Sheffield community. Created on a former agricultural field by Doug Baker and Charlotte Liu, who met while studying landscape architecture at the university, it showcases their ecological approach to planting which has fostered a dense and diverse array of layered plants in communities that feature local and introduced species suited to varying gradients of light and moisture.

'We wanted somewhere to grow plants for our business, and to play around with plants that we don't usually get to use,' says Doug, who runs Arcadia Landscape Design, specialising in school playground design, with Charlotte, who also tutors at the university. 'We wanted something that fitted into this landscape. I was interested in the ecology of wild plants, so we planted up four or five different areas, with each taking initial inspiration from wild plant communities.'

Observing the competitive and stress-tolerant strategies, and employing skilled

**'WE WANTED SOMEWHERE TO PLAY AROUND WITH PLANTS THAT WE DON'T USUALLY GET TO USE.'**

editing, the duo has achieved a subtle balance between the ornamental and wild aspects, providing local designers with a reference point for plant combinations.

Another important regional garden is York Gate, the traditional Arts & Craft-style acre in Leeds created by the Spencer family and now a Grade II National Heritage-listed site that is run by the horticulturists' charity, Perennial. While the site's garden rooms with distinct characters are the mainstay of the visitor attraction, more recent developments have pushed things in new directions.

Under the guidance of its former Head Gardener, Ben Preston, with some design assistance from garden designer Alistair Baldwin, an impressive sand garden was created in 2020 at the entrance to the property, influenced by Swedish plantsman Peter Korn. Initially reminiscent of a neglected olive grove featuring Mediterranean biome plants, now, in the hands of Senior Gardener Tom Nicholls, a wider range of plants suited to the climate is being trialled and observed here.

'I've had to remove plants that began life in pots with soil because in the two to three years they were in the ground, they failed as the roots had no impetus to get out of the soil into the substrate,' Tom explains. 'Now we're removing soil and putting in things that push the boundaries of hardiness.'

'Peter Korn talks about how, by growing in sand, plants gain an extra five degrees of

hardiness over winter and that's what I'm interested in trying here.'

### A PLANT-FILLED FUTURE

With so much activity – nurturing talent, developing community, and creating bonds – the energy driving the horticultural world in Yorkshire is palpable. A resilient social ecosystem has evolved there that others in the industry could do worse than take as a model to establish similar communities elsewhere, to help ensure everyone can enjoy a plant-filled future. ○

## WHO'S WHO

**Arcadia Landscape & Design**, [arcadialandscape.com](http://arcadialandscape.com)

**Cliff Bank Nursery**, [cliffbanknursery.co.uk](http://cliffbanknursery.co.uk)

**Creative Cultivation**, [creativecultivation.co.uk](http://creativecultivation.co.uk)

**Freckles and Flora**, [frecklesandflora.co.uk](http://frecklesandflora.co.uk)

**Grey to Green**, [greytogreen.org.uk](http://greytogreen.org.uk)

**Hooton's Walled Nursery**, [hootonswallednursery.co.uk](http://hootonswallednursery.co.uk)

**Hortus Collective**, [hortuscollective.co.uk](http://hortuscollective.co.uk)

**Pictorial Meadows**, [pictorialmeadows.co.uk](http://pictorialmeadows.co.uk)

**Talking Plants**, [@talking\\_plants\\_sheffield](https://@talking_plants_sheffield)

**The Green Estate**, [greenestate.org.uk](http://greenestate.org.uk)

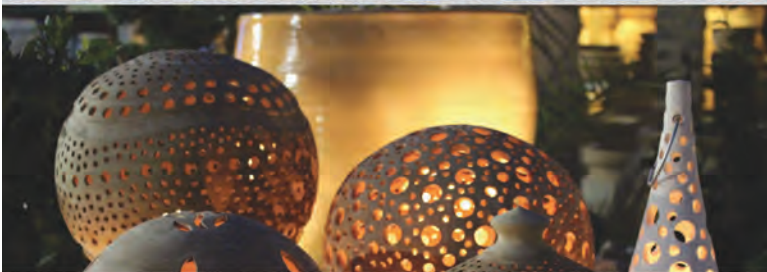
**The Hepworth Wakefield**, [hepworthwakefield.org](http://hepworthwakefield.org)

**York Gate**, [perennial.org.uk](http://perennial.org.uk)

**Yorkshire School of Garden Design**, [ysgd.co.uk](http://ysgd.co.uk)



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# PLANTING TO INSPIRE A GREENER FUTURE

In his design for Merstham Park School in Surrey, pre-registered SGD member Nicholas Atherton has embraced biophilic design, a concept, he tells **Philip Clayton**, that may hold solutions for many of the objectives that have been outlined in an ambitious strategy published by the Department for Education

**T**hink back to your time at school and remember in particular the buildings and grounds where you spent those formative years. For many, especially those who went to school in towns and cities, the view beyond the windows is likely to have been of a bland-looking communal space, a tree or two and, for those schools fortunate to have space for such a thing, a sports playing field.

Even today, in spite of the generally acknowledged and scientifically proven importance of access to and experiences with Nature in determining a person's character, interests and attitudes to life, there is often little to connect many school premises with the landscape and wild habitats that lie beyond their boundaries.

Indeed, at a time when we need more than ever to have an informed appreciation of the environment, it feels as if too many school leavers have lost touch with our natural world.

Times are changing, however. In 2022, the Department for Education (DfE) published *Sustainability and climate change: a strategy for the education and children's services systems*,<sup>1</sup> a suitably long title for a policy paper with an epic vision: to make the British education sector a leader in climate change and sustainability by 2030.

Its scope is wide ranging, supporting the Conservative Government's *25 Year Environment Plan and Net Zero Strategy* published in 2018, and it applies not only to schools but also to higher education institutions and children's social care.

The document outlines the importance of learning from and connecting with Nature, and is summed up in a quote from the 2021 Dasgupta Review, which looked at the economics of biodiversity: 'Creating an environment from an early age where we are able to connect to Nature is essential for self-enforcement in protecting and valuing Nature.'

School buildings and grounds are an area of some focus, with the policy paper stating that climate adaptation and decarbonisation activity in school buildings can themselves provide learning opportunities to help prepare children for a world affected by climate change. It recommends the adaptation of existing buildings and designing new 'net-zero' ones and advises enhancing biodiversity and increasing access to and connection with Nature in and around education settings.

Tantalisingly, mention is also made of evaluating Britain's first biophilic primary school.

## BIOPHILIC DESIGN IN ACTION

An approach that aims to connect people with Nature within built environments, biophilic →



**Nicholas Atherton,  
pre-registered SGD  
member**

completed his Masters in Urban Design at Leeds Beckett University in 2012, and has been working as a chartered landscape architect and garden designer since 1998. In 2013, he founded his practice, Natural Dimensions, and its portfolio spans private garden design, landscape planning, city space and street design, urban masterplanning, and Landscape/Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment work. [naturaldimensions.co.uk](http://naturaldimensions.co.uk)



design works through providing direct and indirect experiences of Nature.

Direct experiences might be having contact with plants, animals, water, weather, and natural landscapes; indirect ones could include being surrounded by natural materials, forms that evoke Nature, and natural geometry.

The essence of biophilic design is that it takes an holistic approach to a site and to the built environment, with the potential to positively affect climate resilience, health and wellbeing, and in the context of schools, student performance.

As a result, biophilic design offers a way of implementing many of the recommendations in the DfE's strategy.

The primary school that is referred to in the paper is St Mary's Catholic Voluntary Academy in Derby,<sup>2</sup> but a new secondary school, Merstham Park School near Redhill in Surrey, has also been constructed using biophilic principles, and it too is expected to be a template for future developments.

The design of the grounds at Merstham is the work of landscape architect and pre-registered member of the SGD, Nicholas Atherton, of

Natural Dimensions, a practice that specialises in urban projects that fuse natural and built elements into site design.

His involvement in the project came about through previous connections made with Blue Sky Architects. That practice in turn had a relationship with McAvoy, the modular build contractor on the framework for the Department for Education, and it was someone at this company who, in March 2020, asked Nicholas to carry out the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment for the Merstham project.

He was then invited by Blue Sky Architects to work on the landscape design. Commissioned and financed by the Department for Education, at first, it was a fairly conventional project. Things soon changed, however. 'After the summer of 2020, we learned the DfE was interested in a biophilic design exemplar,' Nicholas recalls.

'It was a new concept and significant time was spent researching the approach. I had worked on large sites before but at 19.7 acres (including the playing field), the extent of the complexity of planting for this project was on a new scale.'



## DRIP-FEED BIOPHILIC DESIGN INTO A SITE

Nicholas believes in making nature-friendly interventions in existing school grounds, perhaps in urban sites where space is limited or where budgets do not allow an extensive redesign. Examples include:

- **Make an outdoor nature room**  
Somewhere quiet, screened off with trellis for small groups and one-on-one conversations with teachers. Larger spaces could become an outdoor classroom.
- **Install a green or living wall**  
Some systems are cost-effective and can be easily attached to existing walls.
- **Add a growing corner** with allotment-style beds
- **Plant small pockets of woodland**  
Plant up a small woodland garden and see how the area evolves over time.
- **Think more about wildlife**  
Add bird boxes, feeders, and bird baths.
- **Create a welcoming entrance**  
Add an archway or pergola planted with climbers.



**OPPOSITE:** in the courtyard, *Acer palmatum*, *Liquidambar* 'Worplesdon', *Amelanchier* 'Robin Hill', and *Prunus* spp. *Betula* spp. provide cover for the groundlayer matrix. **ABOVE, FROM TOP:** the Martin Beard Memorial Garden; the wildflower meadow frames the main courtyard, building elevations and playing fields; planted mounds of *Stachys* 'Hummelo', *Helenium*, *Miscanthus*, and *Sesleria* along the west side of the school; the front lawn, diversified with wildflower swales and grasses.

**'I WANTED THE DESIGN TO PROVIDE A CLEAR MOOD TRANSITION AS SOON YOU ARRIVE AND OFFER PUPILS A RELAXING, WELCOMING FEEL.'**

Construction began in November 2021, with completion required by August 2022, and a 10-day slot for planting allocated that autumn.

### A VISION REALISED

'My strategy was to embed the school in the wider landscape,' Nicholas explains. 'With the Surrey Hills to the north and Green Belt to the south, I liked the idea that Nature wraps around the site.'

Naturalistic mounding and planting at the western elevation helps the building sit into the landscape, while design elements suggest urban nature and woodland, with the trees, planting, and structures connecting a teaching environment with the natural world. 'Despite being in leafy Surrey, this is an urban school and not a wealthy area – many of the children don't have access to a garden at home,' says Nicholas.

The manmade landscape certainly provides the appearance of a naturalistic environment, and it becomes increasingly wild the further you move away from the buildings. For example, swales are planted with wildflowers while lawned areas have been sown with a clover mix to encourage pollinators. Pockets of woodland composed of native trees such as oak and field maple mask the perimeter of the car park and soften the building's southern flank.

Planting in general provides colour, texture, and movement, reflecting natural rhythms and seasons. Nicholas is pleased with the grasses he used. 'I wanted the design to provide a clear mood transition as soon you arrive and offer pupils a relaxing, welcoming feel. I think the grasses I've included – *Sesleria*, *Molinia*, *Calamagrostis*, *Stipa* and *Miscanthus* – help with this change.'

One special area, and part of the experience at the school entrance, is a circular memorial garden for a much-loved former headmaster. Here, glass panels are engraved with the key principles in which he believed, while yew hedges help define the space and long-flowering, blue *Geranium* ROZANNE ('Gerwat'<sup>PBR</sup>), *Achillea* 'Moonshine' and *Erigeron glaucus* 'Sea Breeze' combined with tactile grasses inspire a mood of reflection.

The school buildings form an approximate C-shape and within that, a courtyard provides the main social space, with its circular motif and areas for outdoor dining protected by a partially glazed pergola, rainwater runoff from which feeds a rain garden below. There are also subsidiary spaces surrounded by greenery, and an area for use as an outdoor stage. →

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Nicholas's masterplan for the landscape surrounding Merstham Park School.

Naturalistic plantings of grasses and perennials are punctuated by box balls, while a range of trees such as upright-growing *Liquidambar styraciflua* 'Worplesdon' are important elements. 'There's a strong sense of canopy,' says Nicholas, casting shadows, rustling in the breeze, and reducing solar gain inside the school. Permeable paving also allows rainwater to be collected and used to flush the lavatories.

Nicholas's work at Merstham gives pupils daily contact with Nature, supporting learning, wellbeing and physical activity. He feels 'schools should be the basis for children to really learn about Nature and become advocates for environmental stewardship'.

The DfE has yet to assess the use of the biophilic design, but evidence is building to indicate that this holistic approach to site and the built environment can be highly positive; anecdotal feedback suggests the overall mood of the school is elevated, with pupils showing improved focus and staff highly motivated.

The landscapes at Merstham are far removed from those experienced by many pupils around

the country, past and present. Establishing greater contact with Nature in schools, and a better collective use of the DfE estate, managed so that it fights against bio-depletion, are potential big steps that can be encouraged by changes in strategic planning and at policy level within the DfE, as well as by wider strategies aimed at boosting Nature-responsive development, such as Biodiversity Net Gain regulations.

Even those schools with limited space can provide pupils with access to nature, by planting trees, for instance, or mixing long grasses with wildflowers and bulbs along boundaries. Other possibilities include building raised allotment beds to encourage food production, and creating outdoor classrooms. Indoors, the calming effects of Nature can be explored with indoor plants or incorporating biomorphic patterns into the school's interior decoration.

For Nicholas, the benefits of a biophilic approach to school estate management are clear. 'We need children to become passionate about the natural world; in my opinion there is no better place for biophilic design than in a school.' ○

## USEFUL RESOURCES

Nicholas has found the following useful during his work on the Merstham Park School project:

**Let's Go Zero Campaign**, Ovo Foundation, [letsgozero.org/ovo-foundation-and-lets-go-zero-partnership](https://letsgozero.org/ovo-foundation-and-lets-go-zero-partnership)

**National Education Nature Park and Climate Action Awards**, launched by the DfE, [educationnaturepark.org.uk](https://educationnaturepark.org.uk)

**RHS School Gardening Initiative**, [schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk/home](https://schoolgardening.rhs.org.uk/home)

**Terrapin Bright Green**, [terrapinbrightgreen.com/reports/14-patterns](https://terrapinbrightgreen.com/reports/14-patterns)

**Woodland Trust**, [woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/schools-and-communities](https://woodlandtrust.org.uk/plant-trees/schools-and-communities)

**Winston's Wish**, [winstonswish.org/growing-hope](https://winstonswish.org/growing-hope)

**Schools That Heal: Design with mental health in mind**, by Claire Latane, 2021

**The Nature Fix: Why nature makes us happier, healthier, and more creative**, by Florence Williams, 2017

**The Well Gardened Mind: Rediscovering nature in the modern world**, by Sue Stuart-Smith, 2020

1. [gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy](https://gov.uk/government/publications/sustainability-and-climate-change-strategy)
2. [stmarysderby.srscmat.co.uk/pupils-and-staff-have-moved-into-the-uks-greenest-primary-school-three-years-after-their-original-building-was-devastated-by-fire](https://stmarysderby.srscmat.co.uk/pupils-and-staff-have-moved-into-the-uks-greenest-primary-school-three-years-after-their-original-building-was-devastated-by-fire)



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# ROUND UP

New garden design and horticulture books

BOOK OF THE MONTH



**BY:** Christopher Wills  
**PUBLISHED BY:** Oxford University Press  
**PRICE:** £35 (hardback)  
**ISBN:** 978-0192887573

## WHY ECOSYSTEMS MATTER: PRESERVING THE KEY TO OUR SURVIVAL

**HUMANS AND ALL THE OTHER** species with which we share the planet rely on ecosystems to function, in order to survive. With both long-term and more recent accelerated deterioration of many of the planet's ecosystems, however, their inability to function as they have is having serious effects. The real question, then, is not about the importance of ecosystems but how to restore and conserve them.

Ecologists have long tried to get to the heart of how ecosystems function. But as emergent, non-linear, complex systems that have no overriding form of control directing them, this has been no mean feat. Much research has been carried out on ecosystem assembly in particular, and most of this is discussed in terms of the lifecycles of their constituent organisms, and the interactions and feedback that take place between them. Christopher Wills covered much of this ground in his 2013 book, *Resilient Equilibrium*, where he also discussed their biological foundations, and it is something he follows up in greater detail in this book.

Much of the text focuses on recent genetic research and exploration of the complexity and diversity of microbiomes. Covering bacteria, viruses, pathogens, mutations and mutualisms, the book is

rich in detail regarding genes and their behaviours, providing valuable insights into the chemistry underpinning life and the processes by which it continues to survive in all its wonderful guises.

The implication of the research is that because of its universality, it applies across the spectrum of lifeforms, but while there is some discussion of grassland conservation projects, the book's focus is not for those who want easy insights about plants and charismatic fauna.

Wills places all of this within an evolutionary context. His notion of 'the wisdom of the genes' proposes that gene adaptation is not simply an immediate response to their current environments, but that they also have stored capabilities evolved through previous adaptations. As a result, he is optimistic about the future, believing that despite the current environmental challenges, ecosystems have the ability to survive the changing conditions.

The question is how will we use all this information, and what positive roles will we play in ensuring this benefits all of Earth's lifeforms?

*Reviewed by pre-registered SGD garden designer Darryl Moore.*

## ALL THE PRESIDENTS' GARDENS: HOW THE WHITE HOUSE GROUNDS HAVE GROWN WITH AMERICA

**INSTEAD OF ATTEMPTING** to write the history of American gardening, as her editor proposed, Marta McDowell was inspired by a project focusing on the grounds of the White House in Washington, as selected by one of her students at the New York Botanical Gardens, where she teaches landscape history and horticulture.

With her student's leave, McDowell had clearly found a unique approach to compiling the history of an American garden that also happens to be one of the oldest continually cultivated gardens in north America.

McDowell's research comprises more than 200 years of a well-documented but untold history of an 18-acre garden estate that was created as a key element of the newly planned federal city of Washington.

The US Presidents are chronologically ordered (not all are listed as some had no engagement with the grounds) and grouped by cultural, social, historical associations and events into eight chapters, beginning with George Washington, and ending with the Obamas and a glimpse of Trump.

To whittle and craft so many facts, contextual information and illustrations into a pacy narrative is a real skill and makes for an illuminating read.

I was surprised by how many Presidents and First Ladies were serious gardeners or serious about this garden, and how new ideas were introduced by landscape architects such as Beatrix Farrand, Frederick Law Olmsted, and Frederick Law Olmsted Jr, and head gardeners and others who maintained the grounds. Huge glasshouses were constructed and later demolished, trees were planted, and some relocated. First Lady Helen Taft's avenue of cherries along the Tidal Basin, for instance, were replanted when they failed, and 100 years later, new trees were propagated from the old. Jacqueline Kennedy's Rose Garden, Lady Bird Johnson's Children's Garden and Michelle Obama's Kitchen Garden were all created and passed on for future Presidents to value, respect or sweep away.

*Reviewed by garden designer Annabel Downs FSGD.*



**BY:** Marta McDowell  
**PUBLISHED BY:** Timber Press  
**PRICE:** \$19.99 (hardback)  
**ISBN:** 978-1643262222

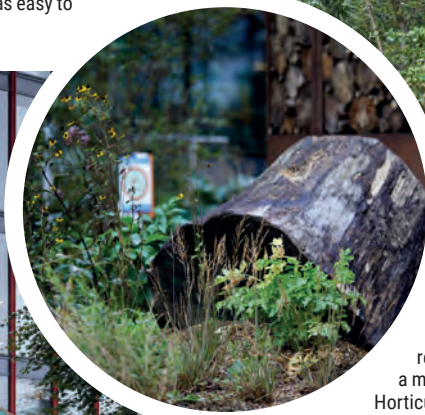
# METAMORPHOSIS

Tom Massey MSGD's RHS Chelsea award-winning insect laboratory garden for the RES is beginning the next stage of its lifecycle at London's Olympic Park

**W**hen Tom Massey MSGD's show garden for the Royal Entomological Society (RES) was recently remade in its permanent location in Stratford Cross, at the gateway to London's Olympic Park, with funding support from the show gardens charity Project Giving Back, it was both instantly recognisable and subtly different from its original award-winning iteration at RHS Chelsea in 2023. As a hub for the RES's new schools' outreach programme in east London, including an augmented-reality bug hunt trail featuring Aardman's *Lloyd of the Flies* animation, changes of level had to be ironed out to create an accessible public space, and the planting plan was adjusted to cope with the wind-tunnel effect, shade, and heat radiation caused by neighbouring tall buildings. However, because this second life had been planned for in Tom's original design, the transfer was remarkably seamless.

## CONSIDERING SUSTAINABLE MATERIALS

The 'bug-eye' structure was the most visually arresting element of the RES garden in its Chelsea incarnation, designed to draw visitors into the extraordinary world of insects while providing a range of integrated habitat opportunities. 'It worked as a showstopper, but there was a lot of substantive detail in the design as well,' says Tom. 'It was created using the Spaceplates system of lightweight and strong, folded, hexagonal steel panels developed by Anne Romme and Anne Bagger, and fabricated for us by Cake Industries. We did debate the environmental impact of using steel but, since it generally contains thirty to fifty per cent recycled materials, is one hundred per cent recyclable and has a long lifespan, we decided it was justifiable for a structure that will sit in its permanent home for many years to come. Plus, this clever modular design is simply held together with bolts, so it was easy to disassemble, store, and then reassemble when the garden was finally relocated.'



## THE NATIVE OR NON-NATIVE QUESTION

Given the current (occasionally heated) debate about the relative environmental benefits of native versus non-native plants, it was notable that Tom's design, representing the priorities of the RES, incorporated a mixture of both. 'I based my approach on the Royal Horticultural Society's *Plants for Bugs* report, which found that although natives do currently provide the greatest benefit to insects and other invertebrates, the advantage is only marginal,' Tom explains. 'We are experiencing increasingly early heatwaves, unpredictable frosts, and periods of heavy rain, all of which confuse the traditional growing patterns of native plants, so it makes sense to give our insects the widest possible range of habitat and food sources.' In the medium to long term, he has concluded, a mixed planting scheme incorporating flowering plants from different countries and regions is likely to prove the most resilient option in our changing climate.

## UNDERSTANDING TEAMWORK

Throughout the garden, a range of integrated habitats are provided through varying topographies and a wide selection of hard materials, including broken pots, leaf mould, piles of sand, and rubble. 'With this approach, there's always the danger that it can end up looking like a heap of old rubbish,' warns Tom. 'When you're using less refined materials and more unusual techniques, it's really important to find a contractor who will fully buy into the process. For this project, we worked with the team from Landscape Associates, people who showed brilliant attention to detail and understood from the outset that it was inevitably going to take a bit longer than a standard build.'

**Tom Massey**, [tommassey.co.uk](http://tommassey.co.uk); **Royal Entomological Society**, [royensoc.co.uk](http://royensoc.co.uk); **Project Giving Back**, [givingback.org.uk](http://givingback.org.uk); **Spaceplates**, [anneromme.com](http://anneromme.com); **Cake Industries**, [cakeindustries.co.uk](http://cakeindustries.co.uk); **Landscape Associates**, [landscapeassociates.co.uk](http://landscapeassociates.co.uk)



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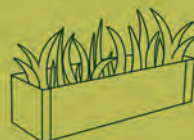
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