

Design For Maintenance

Wednesday 28 September 2011

Ashford International Hotel, Ashford, Kent

Gill Chamberlain, roving Head Gardener.....



In 1997, Gill Chamberlain took the bold decision to leave the IT industry, where she was a Senior International Business Manager, to follow her passion for gardening. She trained at Writtle College and then spent two years as a student gardener at Cambridge University Botanic Gardens. During her tenure at Cambridge she started Garden Rescue, an innovative idea to offer her services as a roving head gardener. Over the last 10 years Gill has looked after large country gardens; designing, developing, renovating and managing existing staff. Gill has a large slide collection - she may forget her mobile but she's never without her camera.

Q&A

If you had to describe your role to someone unfamiliar with the gardening world what would you say you do?

I get called in to help develop a garden; and quite often I get asked to help "rescue" a space. I'm like a roving head gardener; I go in and look at everything that comes under the title of "maintenance". Everything's come by word of mouth - which underlines that what I do really does occupy a gap in the market.

So, are your clients coming to you with 'design for maintenance' uppermost in their minds?

I have a number of long term clients whose gardens I have looked after for a number of years, keeping them looking good, upgrading or developing the garden and plantings to their taste or particular requirements at that moment. They are all large country gardens ranging from one or two to 35 acres. I have one client who is moving this August to a new estate where we are going to start from scratch.

I also advise a number of people who call me in as and when - for example, one client whose garden was regularly open to the public is now feeling her age and so is her gardener, so we are cutting down the number of borders, decreasing the remaining ones in size and replanting with less demanding plants. She calls me in half a dozen times a year to walk the garden, make suggestions, mark out the new outlines of the beds, lift and split existing plants, remove others and finally supply and often plant the new plants. I have others who just call me in before special occasions to give the garden a lift. I'm a resource which they can call in when they feel that they need help or just another opinion. Gardens grow and develop and their needs change, it is exactly the same for a garden owner. It is an ongoing process.



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What do you think are the main responsibilities a designer has when thinking about maintenance?

Designers have a responsibility to design gardens that people can actually look after. I think over a third of my business in the early days would come from me being called in after designers had built a beautiful garden, but hadn't actually spoken to the clients about how it should be looked after. Quite often they'd not assessed whether the client was capable of looking after the garden. We all have a responsibility to make people aware that this is a living thing that needs to be looked after, there's no point in creating an amazing garden inspired by Tom Stuart-Smith for someone who doesn't have time to water.

A design cannot reach its potential without the right care and maintenance. I know that many designers do go back to the gardens which they have done but I do feel that many people are missing a great opportunity to generate regular business as gardens develop, plants behave or don't, owners tastes change or they want to update or develop new areas. They wouldn't necessarily call a designer in as it is only a 'bit' of the garden, but these "bits" add up.

What are the challenges you feel designers need to address?

One of the greatest challenges is to really think about "the future" of the garden we're designing. I think that as an industry we're missing a trick - we need to educate clients and non gardeners that proper gardening and maintenance is a very skilled thing - and if you employ skilled people the garden will evolve (things need to be replaced and updated) but you have to pay people appropriately, not £5 an hour. People think that gardeners can be paid £5 an hour - this isn't appropriate for designed gardens. Most people think of a garden maintenance chap as someone who cuts things back and mows lawns and that's it; proper maintenance is incredibly skilled. I put together a list of the skills needed to properly maintain a garden and it runs to pages.



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Is this plan that you give to the client at the end of the process essential?

Absolutely! When you design for a client it's like trying to explain a painting when someone doesn't know what colours are; quite often a client won't know what the plants are. There are two types of clients; clients who visualise things and those who can't and we should try to understand this. Watering means different things to different people - watering can mean a teaspoon or it can mean putting the irrigation on for 4 days. We need to sit down and explain what we mean by "watering". A garden starts when it is planted and the design should have the ability, capacity and the desire of the garden owners to maintain it as an integral part of the original design. This includes the clients themselves, garden staff and people hired in.

When did you first start gardening or fall in love with horticulture?

I've loved gardening, nature, bugs and bees since I can remember; my wellies were always full of water and tadpoles as a child. When I graduated "horticulture" wasn't really a career and I qualified originally as a school teacher and then got into IT purely by chance, making good money and travelling around the world, but I was never happier than when I had my hands in the soil. I didn't think I had a design bone in my body but knew there was a hole in the market for a roving head gardener.

What are your favourite spaces?

The ones that influenced me really early on were Beth Chatto's gardens. It doesn't matter where in the world the plants have come from but as long as you put the right ones together, plants that grow in the same conditions, then they will look right. The countryside itself is a huge inspiration for me – just walking among it; nature does things far better than we do. Wonderful fruits like *Euonymus alatus*, Spindle, pink and orange together, we'd never put those two colours together but nature does and it works. There are always things to make you stop and go "wow".

Who are your favoured designers and are they the ones who understand maintenance the most?

There are wonderful gardens, but some are extremely complex like Tom Stuart-Smith's which need a highly experienced maintenance workforce to look after them. Designers are very varied; some specialise in space, some are real plants people and there's a whole lot in between. The industry is so varied and there are garden designers who do go back again and again and help their client's gardens to develop and see what works and what doesn't - seeing it at different stages through the years - and that's invaluable. A design cannot reach its full potential without the right care and maintenance.

If I have a project beyond my skills, I'll find the right designer and introduce them in, then we work together to realise that design. I helped Adam Frost with his Gold Medal winning 'Urban Garden' at Chelsea this year.

What are your bugbears?

The gardener who goes and gives his/her shrubs a good haircut! People who have gardens and don't know what they're doing, who ruin plants by cutting them and chopping things back at all the wrong times and then blame the plants for not performing.

What practical implementation do you find yourself repeating again and again?

It's important to develop a good planting scheme which relies on the architectural shapes of the plants, use different leaf types and shades of green, evergreen and deciduous. Using coloured barks and beautiful outlines in the winter when the bones of a garden should be beautiful. Make flowers the bonus - the "Oh Wow" plants which are there for a short time - bulbs and ephemeral flowers.



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Gill Chamberlain will be addressing the annual Palmstead Workshop on the 28th September 2011 and will talk about 'Design for Maintenance'.

Palmstead Nurseries continue their successful series of Soft Landscape Workshops aimed at professional landscapers, designers, specifiers and managers, with 'Design For Maintenance' on Wednesday 28 September 2011 at the Ashford International Hotel, Ashford, Kent.

Now in their 4th year the workshops provide a great opportunity for the industry to come together and share their thoughts on the year and to hear the leaders in their field talk about the future of design and maintenance.

Chaired by Andy Sturgeon, the speakers for 2011 include: -

James Alexander-Sinclair, Gill Chamberlain, Professor James Hitchmough and Noel Farrar.

