

Design For Maintenance

WORKSHOP REPORT

Wednesday 28 September 2011

Ashford International Hotel, Ashford, Kent



At the height of the day the 350 delegates in attendance at Palmstead Nurseries annual soft landscaping workshop were treated to a temperature of 27 degrees in the shade but the hottest topic of the day wasn't the Indian summer it was 'maintenance' and getting both the designers in the rooms and the clients at large to acknowledge how integral maintenance is to design and the larger effect on 'society'.



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ANDY STURGEON: 'VALUE MAINTENANCE - OR THE GARDENS WE DESIGN WILL NOT SURVIVE'.



Andy Sturgeon, chair for the day, opened proceedings at 9:30 am; "When Nick told me the topic for today was going to be maintenance, I said ; 'You're mad - no one will come', but here you all are!"

"Maintenance is obviously very important. We see a lot of glossy picture of fantastic gardens - plant porn I call them - photos of gardens at their peak, but quite often we don't see them when they go into decline due to a lack of maintenance or lack of understanding of how important maintenance is."

Andy took a straw poll of the audience to find the room was made up of contractors, garden designers, landscape architects and green space managers. He spoke directly to all but said that garden designers needed to concentrate more on the topic of maintenance.

Learned design

"There's a certain amount of education needed about maintenance. I look at gardens like Trentham and ask 'how do you look after that?' It's a colossal amount of work, and this garden can only exist if maintenance is done well to maintain how the original vision was designed. It's the same for some of my own gardens."

Andy took the audience on a slide journey through some of the residential gardens he's designed and imparted the essential things he'd learned along the way about maintenance.

"We put a lot of structure into the gardens we design; the reason for this is it provides a static element that will remain consistent through the garden's life." He showed some gardens that had moved some way from his original vision, providing a learning curve for Andy as a designer. He showed how he has since legislated for this change by including things in the design that will keep it looking how he wanted it to originally.

"We frequently use plants that you can leave and they'll get on with it - rosemary, lavender, yucca; they remain fairly static and require minimal maintenance - in a large area it's vital to get that right - you also get fantastic textures from using those varieties.

"A lesson we've learned is to get gardeners into the garden straight away - if they're needed. We always try right from the outset to get our own gardeners in rather than rely on the owners gardener and his/her occasional visits."

Control!

"Design to a large extent is about control - and I want to control it when I've left. It's tricky though - it's someone else's garden."

"I got a call from a new gardener who'd taken over the maintenance of one I'd designed in Docklands and she said; 'they want to put pansies in' at first I was horrified; and then I thought 'if they want pansies in does it really matter?' Partly it was an education, I knew I had to let go of that garden - as far as I know there are pansies

in the garden but I hope I never see it.” Subsequently I now send a colour guide to clients on which colours for bedding etc will be in sympathy with the design and not clash.

“There are ways of wrestling that control back a bit so the garden can continue in the way it was designed. We produce a maintenance guide which clearly sets the heights of hedges - to make sure the garden stays on track. We produce a generic guide and we tailor it to each garden. The guide explains when to cut hedges, the exact height of those hedges, when certain perennials should be pruned etc. We give two copies to the client, one of which is laminated. One copy is for the client, the other is for the gardener - we want them to take it into the garden and get it grubby and wet.

A guide

“When we first started providing the maintenance guide, we didn’t charge for it, we just passed it on. But because we were giving it at the end for free it was ignored, so we decided to charge a minimal fee for it, and as soon as we did that, the client began to value it and actually started to read it. The maintenance guide has made a huge difference; it can be a struggle but it often comes down to lack of understanding about the necessity of maintenance.”

Andy then took the audience through some of the plants he uses frequently from Palmstead and the maintenance pros and cons associated with each.

Andy shared techniques for making it easier for the gardener to keep the garden you design on track; “Over the years, beds can become bigger and lawns smaller, so when we have a lawn edge we’ll use the aluminium edges. We use root rain systems so we’re putting the water right where it’s needed - at the root of the tree; this then hopefully negates the need to replace the tree or physically replant it.”

Pay for it

Andy spoke energetically about a need for educating clients about how important it is to pay for good maintenance of the garden and how the landscape



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industry should respect and look after those who maintain our green spaces.

“People aren’t leaving school and saying ‘I want to do garden maintenance.’ Colleges have stopped teaching it and the wages we pay to those who maintain our green space are too small. Green space managers need to encourage clients to value the maintenance and to pay higher wages - or the gardens we design will not survive”.

NOEL FARRER: ‘BIG CHANGES ARE ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE’



I predict a riot

Noel Farrer, an experienced landscape architect and specialist in public realm space, took to the stage after Andy Sturgeon and asked the audience if they thought there was a connection this summer between the riots and the environment that people live in.

He declared; “I want to talk about politics. Our urban landscapes aren’t funny. Public realm spaces are critical for how and where a society expresses itself. If you look at the places where these people came from (referring to the rioters) there is some explanation to the way they are. The Government needs to wake up and understand that we need to have serious investment in landscape and the maintenance of the space.

Noel explained that as a practice they always provided management and maintenance plans for large

schemes, but said; "They're absolutely not read, they're sitting on dusty shelves."


Noel showed a slide of graffiti saying; 'people = shit' painted in a concrete landscape. "If you create the types of environments that are low grade and driven by maintenance complaints and target hardening, you'll end up with people being as philosophical as this; 'I hate you I'm going to kick in your windows'."

Social as sustainable

Noel explained "There are three pillars of sustainability - economic, environmental and social. Of the three, I'm interested in the 'social'; in reconnecting people with space. Nature creates environments that communities can delight in and which in turn can help them to deal with social issues.

"If you create spaces that enable people to feel safe then you have an incredibly desirable place and a sustainable space, because people want to keep it desirable.

Taking the audience back to the Bronze Age, Noel pointed to vast investment in public realm spaces like Stonehenge 'In the Bronze Age - it was the opposite to now - it didn't happen in the closed space, it happened in the big public realm spaces. It all happens behind closed doors now in our private gardens. We understand the value of what it can bring - health well being, communing and well being - all happens there beautifully, and yet we keep it to ourselves." Noel spoke about one of his projects: Abbey Orchard in London. "The only people who valued that landscape were the people who parked their cars there. We said 'here is a place where you can get rid of the cars - a space where people can use it' in the public realm space one of our big enemies is the car. We had to get 70% of the people on the estate to agree with us - only 10% of people living there had cars. We went on to develop a scheme where the cars came out, the car park came up and we developed an environment that connected people. Interestingly it is the only scheme that I know of where this has happened." Noel's scheme at Abbey Orchard was developed around the idea of bringing people who lived in the surrounding blocks together. The path layouts were designed to connect people; paths were cut like lines cross the landscape,



tempting neighbours to meet each other as they crossed in their shared public space. At the heart of the design was the idea that in order to make things 'sustainable' from a maintenance point of view, you had to make things 'social'; "What we're actually doing is helping people to develop knowledge of people's neighbours, providing comfortable seats where people feel safe, providing leisure in the shape of a small ball court." Noel argued that if you provide a 'social' space then it will be sustainable from a maintenance point of view - those living there will want to keep it, and will fight to keep it. He said of Abbey Orchard; "It's so much greener, birdsong has returned to the place and people can relax and go out and plant their pansies (Andy!). It won 2nd prize in the Westminster in Bloom Competition 2007, and the people who live there will protect it and fight tooth and nail for it to be maintained."

"Strengthening people's relationship with nature is really important, and we need to shout about it. People have a strong identifier with nature but only when they've got it. Once they get it, they'll hang on to it. In the localism agenda this is a positive message - people and communities that value their landscapes over all can have a positive outcome."

A question of value

Noel reasserted his call to the assembled audience to acquaint themselves with the legislative changes going on in the industry. "In 70 years we haven't seen so many changes - get out there, read the four key documents including the National Ecosystem Assessment."

"I have 350 people in front of me here today who are passionate about landscape, how many of you have read the National Ecosystem Assessment or the White Paper consultation paper or the localism bill? Big changes are about to take place - if we don't shout about these changes, no one else will. It's our call." (Links to these were circulated to delegates and are available via the Landscape Institute website).

The National Ecosystem Assessment published their findings in June this year. The NEA analysed the value of the UK's natural environment by taking account of the economic, health and social benefits we get from

nature. The assessment is the first of its kind at a fully national level.

Noel Farrer argued though; "how do you value joy, wonder, well being - it's priceless.' He argued that to put a number on it (£30 billion) was at best it allows people to measure just how important landscape is, but at worst it's a dumbing-down of nature to something purely objective" and concluded "it's an impossible calculation that can only lead to compromise."


He finished with a rallying-call; "Wherever you are promote landscape; it's morally as plain as the nose on your face that landscape is a wonderful thing and something we should invest in."

(Noel's presentation is available via the Palmstead web site).

GILL CHAMBERLAIN: 'MAINTENANCE IS A PROFESSION WHICH SHOULD BE VALUED'



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 opened by saying; "Maintenance is a profession which should be valued. If clients are going to invest in a garden, it can be the price of another car or house for some of us, then to realise that investment you need key people to look after it. A garden starts when it is planted and that 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."

Gap in the market

"Like many of you my interest in gardening started when I was young but it wasn't until 15 years ago that I understood I could learn a living by doing something I loved."

Gill described having found a 'gap in the market' when she formed her business as a roving head gardener; "I realised there was a big gap between the garden designer and garden owner and I could fill that gap."

Gill described a number of long term clients whose gardens she has 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." Most of Gill's clients own or manage large country gardens ranging from one or two to 35 acres. She often comes in to a garden to rescue it after maintenance of the space has been neglected, or misunderstood, and she also begins work on spaces from scratch too.

"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 thing 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."

Gill explained that the job of good maintenance was something that required 'great skill' in order to maintain something of the original design or intent. She made a plea to all designers and landscape architects present to make Maintenance Plan a paid for element of the original design.

Communication

Gill pointed to 'communication' as absolutely key if a designer wanted the garden they designed to go on to live a full life, in the form it was originally designed.

"A design cannot reach its potential without the right care and maintenance - and without a detailed maintenance plan. 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."

Gill went further than Andy Sturgeon and suggested that the plan should be as detailed as possible, and tailored to each garden. Watering guides should be very specific. She said: "Watering means different things to different people - watering can mean a teaspoon or it can mean putting the irrigation on for 4 days. I've had clients who didn't water enough in the summer - and the plants were literally screaming at me - and I've had clients who have left the irrigation on and literally drowned plants in the winter. We need to sit down and explain what we mean by 'watering'."

The future

Gill closed by saying; "One of the greatest challenges is to really think about 'the future' of the garden we're designing." Gill encouraged the audience to view maintenance as a skilled job that required proper wages and as something that called a huge 'value' for both the client and the industry at large.



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PROFESSOR JAMES HITCHMOUGH: 'APPLYING AN ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE TO AID LONG TERM MAINTENANCE'.



"Now for something completely different as they say" opened Professor Hitchmough as he bounded to the stage brimming with energy and verve.

Professor Hitchmough described his work over the last 15 to 20 years as the challenge of trying to do something positive in an urban landscape with low aspirations, low levels of skill and poor funding. He said that we have a choice; "We can either live in urban landscapes that are just rubbish - a world of squalor and despair where quite often the best you can hope for is they pick up the dead dogs - or you can try to do something positive."

Professor Hitchmough's research into vegetation has provided an optimistic alternative to the norm; "The only way I could see of doing something positive was to deal head-on with the reality of low levels of skill, training and aspiration. My work has been about finding ways of creating vegetation that's rich and highly detailed but using pared down processes to their minimal essence."

Professor Hitchmough told the audience that if one looked to nature conservation and how those spaces of semi-natural vegetation are managed, then we can see we can “produce eye candy but with a fraction of the skills or resources.”

Professor Hitchmough said he valued traditional craft skills but said they were ‘thin on the ground’, so we could either “sit in a bunker and wait for a better day, or invent new worlds”.

Sewing with seeds in situ, Professor Hitchmough creates colour-rich naturalistic vegetation. He also works with planting too - in repeating patterns. He admitted to having a post-modern bleak vision of the world where he needed “to guarantee” that the man in the street could appreciate it and say “that’s fantastic - that’s wonderful - if you have the hairy-men on your side (referring to the construction team in the Olympic Park) then you’ve almost won.” He referred to this as a serious challenge and something that could only really be achieved by the use of “colour” and “vernacular aesthetics” saying “there’s no point in inventing a world that you need to read the book before you can appreciate it”

Durability

The quest to make the vegetation long-lasting is important to Professor Hitchmough, he professed to the audience; “I am a researcher as well as a practitioner and the vegetation I make isn’t just eye-candy, it also has to be durable and has to persist so that hopefully it’s immortal.”

He demonstrated several gardens (including the prairie border at Wisley) that he’d planted up to ten years prior which were still performing, comparing them to ; “Cats, the West End show - immortal but with a different star performer every year.”

Plant choices - The Rules

Investigating semi-natural systems is a way that Professor Hitchmough seeks to find the ‘wow factor’.

He underlined how important it was to accept that there’s no difference between how wild vegetation and

cultivated plants respond to ecological factors. "My work in particular has been about trying to apply the ecological rules that govern what can be designed. There are rules beyond which you cannot go - they circumscribe what is possible and what is sustainable. They're universal, blind and don't distinguish between wild and cultivated plants. There's no difference between how they respond to ecological factors.

In ecological terms cultivated and wild plants are the same." This he said was a revelation and hugely important when looking at the arguments around ecology. He also professed a similar interest in having native and non-native plants together in urban places. He said that the current cultural obsession with 'natives' was limiting. "For most people 'less isn't more' 'less is less'." He went on to say : "I deplore the current trend within the sustainability debate to create a simplistic world in which natives are good and aliens are bad. Increasingly local government seems to have bought into this, particularly planning departments. This position will neither maximise human cultural experience, nor paradoxically wildlife opportunities in cities. It's not going to push the buttons for the man in street. Cultivated plants give us richness and meaning. I don't want to sleep walk into a future that's not going to be rich for me or the man in the street." Professor Hitchmough went on to discuss mixing 'aliens' with 'natives' in order to provide unique 'quirky urban systems' rich in biodiversity. He said that the key argument against 'aliens', namely 'invasion' was flawed, saying that "most aren't capable of being invasive - it's a bit like the fear of communists in the 50s - if we turn our back on them they'll take over. Most cultivated aliens aren't sufficiently well-fitted to be invasive." He went on to look at alien plants as providers of astoundingly good habitats for native invertebrates. He spoke of invertebrates as being opportunists, and "generalists". He remarked that; "Urban gardens in Britain are fabulously rich places for invertebrates whether they're full of aliens or non aliens - you can't tell the difference." He questioned why this hadn't changed the policy for native only. He concluded that it hadn't swayed things because "preferring natives is like a belief in God - we're talking about value systems here."

Joining these ideas together, Professor Hitchmough discussed how they could be wrapped into practice and



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said: "I design for what's in front of me and for what people want. On some sites I work entirely native and wouldn't do anything else and some sites I concentrate on the exotic, and on some I do both. The model I carry around in my head says - there are some land places where culture is the over-riding idea and there are other places where 'nature' is the big drivers. Most of the world lies between this infinite range of possibilities so you need flexibility - you need fluidity to meet the needs of the world. You don't need someone saying 'it's only native' or 'it's only exotic'."

Meadow maintenance

Not fertilising things will apparently give you the best result for low maintenance. To maximise low maintenance in a sustainable world (in a world without resources) "you must match the productivity of the plant world with the productivity of the site."

Employing the rules of ecology Professor Hitchmough says; "if I'm on a fertile site I'll match it with fertile prairie plants - if you want maintenance free systems (like the Olympic Parks for example) you plant using sand. The dry meadows beneath the velodrome have been established on sand, it's less fertile than anything you've seen in your life - but by doing that, we've guaranteed that they'll be there and good in 50 years time. The future is clearly uncertain, but nothing can invade this effectively because the nutrient levels are so low. If we used top soil it would look fantastic next year but in ten years time it will have gone with weeds invading."

Professor Hitchmough went on to describe some of things that were needed to achieve low maintenance, weed-free colourful vegetation.

1. You have to start with weed free conditions and maintain it in first year. If you start weedy, you'll end weedy.
 2. We use a lot of sand. (Shock horror! Coming to a place near you soon!)
 3. Use 'density' as a weed control. Density is something you can manipulate.
 4. Mixed planting on a random basis.
- Use maintenance techniques to reset the clock (this only works when you design a community for all the plants

to be treated in the same way on the same day). All will be flash burned - it's simple and do-able by anyone. By doing this the maintenance costs will be about 4 hours per 100 square metres per annum.

"Both our research and practice suggests that it is possible to utilise ecological principles to facilitate long term maintenance. There is no magic in all of this. If you want to be sustainable in the true sense of the word then it does require discipline from the designers. You have to say 'is this planting sufficiently well fitted to be useable - you have to engage with those sorts of ideas. You have to use species which can be subjected to the same generic maintenance practice - those that can be burned! You also have to ensure there are sufficient resources available in the first year. If you get to the end of the first year weed free, then you've pretty much won."

(James' presentation is available via the Palmstead web site.)

JAMES ALEXANDER SINCLAIR: 'I DON'T LIKE LETTING GO OF MY GARDENS; MY IDEAL JOB GOES ON FOR TEN YEARS!'



As a garden designer, James Alexander-Sinclair is well known for his evocative plant combinations and his ability to design beautiful gardens. He's well known in the industry for his blogging prowess, his well crafted articles and his brilliantly funny presentations.

"Most of my stuff requires gardeners." He said to the assembled audience; " One of the first questions I'll ask a client is; 'how much gardening do you want to do'. Then I have to ask 'can you afford a gardener'?"

James joked that the best advice he could give regarding design for maintenance was to "pick your clients because they have money - if they have less money than you - they're the wrong person. They have to have more. Deep down we should love bankers - they have bonuses and they spend it on us. We should like the fact that bankers getting bonuses - they are the ones who are in the position to employ decent people to look after the stuff we do."

On a serious note, James underlined that the newly designed garden "will deteriorate and vanish really quickly if it's not looked after."

James professed to making friends with his clients and said that he "only works with people he likes" as he's going to be spending a lot of time with them. "I don't like letting go of my gardens - my ideal job goes on for ten or fifteen years. How I want to build a garden with a client is the same way I build one for myself - I don't want to get in there and get the hell out - I like something that has space for me and development and a place for me to sit at their kitchen table and eat their best biscuits for at least the next decade. Then nothing can go wrong - I'm there."

James suggested that any design scheme will change - nothing stays the same for the client. "The client's situations change - their children grow up, they buy a dog, things change, and if you're not there to help the whole thing will go to hell in a hand-cart."

Design for maintenance

James delivered some interesting sound-bites on how to design with maintenance in mind.

"We want our clients to love what we do, enjoy it and nurture it. I try and teach every client I have that there's nothing wrong with having a couple of weeds in there. Nobody's been arrested for having weeds in their garden - be relaxed about it.

“There’s a lot of guff written about (I may have even written it myself) how places should be calm and commune with nature, but what we really want is to go out there and be enthused.

“Colour is primeval - it appeals to everyone. It’s all about the colour and the way it affects them and moves them.

“Work with the shape of the flower and the colour and the way they go together - all of those things can enrich people’s lives and make us happier. I haven’t drawn a planting plan for 3 and a half years because I like to just do it. I drop in groups and singles and different combinations. Put all of these things together you end up with the beginnings of gardens - of plants coming together. Of course all of these spaces need looking after. Quite a lot of plants need staking, dividing and phaffing around with.

Sex and death

“Gardens as we know are mostly about sex and death - when death comes it has to be as pretty as you can make it. If you cut things down there is no picturesque death - there are plants out there who die like poets in garrets - you want to keep them going for as long as you possibly can. Plants are not puppies - if you want to kill them it’s okay. If you get bored of them, you can compost them - they can go to that special place behind the shed. Chuck stuff out, throw things away, move things around.

James closed the day by saying: “If everything is low maintenance, where is the skill? There’s no skill in wielding a hedge trimmer, there’s skill in looking after a garden - we need more gardeners who can do this stuff. If we don’t have high maintenance gardens where will these people learn?”



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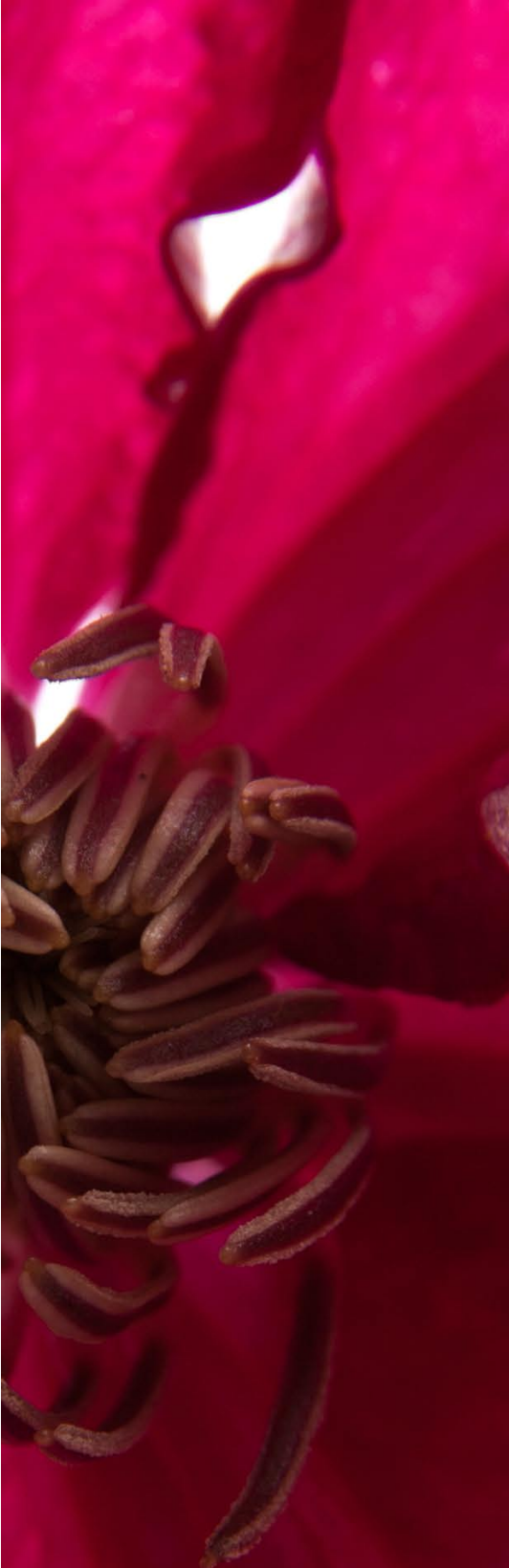
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Nick Coslett, Marketing and Sales Manager for Palmstead Nurseries Ltd said at the close of the annual event; "We've had a fantastic day - the speakers were really great and provided a lot of food for thought. It's important we value the skills needed to maintain things and we each have to be an ambassador to promote those skills to our clients and also be ambassadors to promote quality green space for all."

Nick then introduced key members of his team to the audience who later escorted a large number of delegates back to the Nursery at Wye in order to see view the plants and take a tour of the site.

The Palmstead team are always on hand to offer guidance and the benefit of their expertise to all our customers. It is important to us that the plants we grow go on to thrive and display well; whatever their location. Plants do make places better for people. At Palmstead we will continue to listen and respond to our customer's needs with new plants, more accessible information on our web site and superb quality of service.



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