

Register NOW for
Palmstead Soft Landscape Workshop



“What have plants ever done for us?”

Wednesday 21st September 2016

Palmstead’s annual soft landscape workshop this year will focus on the health and well-being benefits of plants and how certain plants can enhance human health while others can really make people sick.

By asking “What have plants done for us?” we hope to stimulate a very timely debate. Plants can make us all better and we need to make informed choices to achieve right plant right place.

Ahead of the workshop, international designer Jinny Blom with a psychology background, spoke to us about designing therapeutic landscapes.

Therapeutic landscapes: A profile of Jinny Blom



Photo Nathalie Jouan

Jinny Blom is a thinker, but you won’t find her sitting under a tree waiting for an apple to fall, she’s a woman of action and ‘a doer’. She takes a common sense approach and works without restrictions to design aesthetically beautiful therapeutic landscapes that have made her one of the most sought-after designers in the country.

Blom set up her design practice in 2000 in London and has accumulated an extraordinary portfolio of work in the UK, Europe, Africa, Middle East and the USA creating over 250 gardens and landscapes, private and public spaces.

As artist in residence for the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital Blom’s role is ongoing and the work she creates for the hospital forms part of academic research into benefits on health.

She found garden design and landscape in her 30s after working for many years with a mental health charity and direct action community groups. Her former life helping men with schizophrenia reduce their drug intake and improve their mental health via

horticultural therapy, informs everything she knows about creating well-designed spaces.

She says: "It's common sense really. I know instinctively that our environmental landscape has a very potent effect on us; be it good, bad or indifferent. Working in the late 1980s and early 1990s we were literally at the 'cutting edge' of mental health care. When the Industrial Therapy Unit at Vauxhall initiated the horticultural programme for psychiatric patients we were able to show that this wasn't touchy feely sentimentalism, this was real direct action that made an impact on patients lives."

Blom's life's work has focused on how people live and exist in spaces. She says: "I worked first with people, then food, then the environment and it actually took me a long time to put all the pieces together to come to the conclusion that what's important to me is 'the space that people live in'. This underpins everything and if you can understand space and if you understand planting, then the rest happens by osmosis."

What sets her apart and makes her contribution to landscape exhilarating is the clarity with which she communicates the space she has designed. Her planting is aesthetically beautiful but it's often uncomplicated. She manages to achieve this, she says, by investing 'thinking time' at the start of the project.

Thinking forms a large part of the creative process for Blom - it also underpins her ecological thoughts: "I'm a career ecologist and a plantswoman; rather than looking at tick-lists, I like to spend a lot of time 'thinking' about the project, making good choices so that I can do the thing properly and do it once!"



Creating healthy spaces come from her encyclopedic understanding of plants. She says: "If you really understand plants then you are going to choose the right plant for the right environment and make good choices - it should be something that is inherent to your understanding of what you are doing."

Being self-taught has given Blom the edge in a competitive industry which at times is caught up in ticking boxes to satisfy ecological protocols. She says: "Being self-taught is part of the world that I grew up in. The 1970s was a very different time - when I left school there was nothing going on, you had to figure it out for yourself. It was a very practical time. We weren't constrained in the way young people are nowadays - there was much more exploration and free-associating and thinking."

She takes her inspiration still from her late psychology tutor Ian Gordon Brown, an industrial psychologist who was interested in action-centred psychology; looking at how we engage with things and how we can change things on a very practical

level. Blom says: “he died the year I started my practice but he’s the person who inspires me still, he was the one who joined the dots up for me and helped me understand that you don’t have to work one-to-one to provide therapy, that you can use the environment to work on a larger level.”

Action and energy are important if you are a transpersonal psychologist - someone who literally uses action to change things, help people to grow and liberate themselves. And Blom is keen to liberate ‘woolly’ attitudes about using garden design for wellbeing by sharing evidence-based information on what can really be achieved in the field.

Press references to her work with HRH Prince of Wales and their ‘Healing Garden’ at the 2002 RHS Chelsea Flower Show were frustrating for Blom, with one magazine referring to her as a quasi-yoga practitioner rather than a designer with intentions to communicate how important spaces are to our health and well-being.

As a Board Member of the Therapeutic Landscapes Network in NYC she is part of a community of international and multidisciplinary designers, health and human service providers, scholars and gardeners. The focus is broad, but the primary emphasis of the Network is on evidence-based design in healthcare settings. Combining this with her role as artist in residence for CW+ at the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital in London, Blom hopes to prove that there is real academic information from the artistic initiatives undertaken by these organisations.



Of the work at C+W in London (left), she says: “the results are academic, they have been monitored and recorded and prove that the art work can positively influence pain, stress and reduce drug-intake. If you can prove these initiatives work and that they can actually cut the NHS budget, then it’s very worthwhile - it’s serious stuff!”

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Wednesday 21st September
09:00 – 16:00 approx.

Speakers at the 9th Palmstead Workshop held at the Ashford International Hotel in Kent, will include landscape and garden designer Jinny Blom, botanist and curator of the Natural History Museum Dr Mark Spencer, urban greening specialist Anne Jaluzot, RHS research fellow Dr Tiana Blanus plus medics turned garden designers Jackie Herald and Shenagh Hume from Allergy UK. Raoul Curtis-Machin from the Horticultural Trades Association will also give a short presentation on biosecurity.

Sign up here: www.palmstead.co.uk click on events.
Delegate fee £36 includes lunch and Vat.