

# Great Expectations

Make your dreams a reality by commissioning a professional garden designer to transform your precious outdoor space, using our guide to the intricacies of the process

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These rills in a private garden were inspired by a similar design by the great landscape architect Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, at Shute House in Dorset.





In recent months, few places have been as cherished as our gardens, which, no matter how large or small, whether rural or urban, have offered relief from the strains of these unprecedented times. The rush on garden centres and nurseries over the spring and summer of 2020 points to how much our gardens have come to mean to us. But sometimes putting in a few new plants isn't quite enough. If lockdown has inspired greater expectations of your outdoor space, hiring a designer could be just the thing to do.

Designers offer varying levels of service. It's possible to contract one to elevate a front garden, make changes to a terrace or overhaul dated planting, but good designers can also develop, for example, a country garden masterplan to be executed over many years, as and when time and funds allow. "A designer can offer a morning's consultation or sketch a plan. It doesn't need to

**Above** Sinuous curves define a natural pond by designer Julie Toll. **Right** Marian Boswall designed this labyrinth of wildflowers in Sussex.



be the full service, although for most designers the dream is to work on a complete garden and oversee the build," explains Andrew Duff, designer, managing director of the Inchbald School of Design and vice-chair of the Society of Garden Designers (SGD).

Many but certainly not all designers will have some kind of qualification in design or landscape architecture. Well-known schools include KLC, Inchbald School of Design, London College of Garden Design, Writtle, Capel Manor and the Oxford College of Garden Design, all of which offer courses of varying lengths. Larger firms might employ designers with degrees in landscape architecture. But while acquiring a qualification is a good indicator of ability, it doesn't automatically make someone a good designer. Some designers with a wealth of experience have no formal training.

With its extensive search facility, the SGD is a good place to start looking for a designer. This is the industry professional body: accredited members must subscribe to a code of conduct, and hold up-to-date professional indemnity and public liability insurance. The SGD also offers conflict mediation in the rare event of dispute. "Should a client and designer fall out, either party can come to the SGD and we are there to mediate," says Andrew. "But if it's an honest relationship, disputes are unlikely."

**Above** Plenty of designers, including Angel Collins, have an ongoing relationship with their clients as the garden matures.

The SGD is an important part of the industry, but not every established designer is a member. A good way to gauge someone is to view their portfolio, which should be online, and social media channels – Instagram is a fair place to start. Clear communication from the start is a good indicator of what will follow.

Andrew advises sifting through a few designers to find those with an appealing design and work ethic. Meet with them more than once before you commit. Then, think hard about what you want for your garden, or, if it's easier, what you don't want. To establish a visual representation of this, create a folder of images cut out from magazines or saved from online platforms, adding or deleting images as your preferences become clearer. The designer, too, should develop a mood board for you to establish, as Andrew puts it, that you're both seeing the right shade of yellow. Don't be shy. Designers deal with a range of clients, from those who have no visual skills to experienced plantspeople. They are adept at determining what it is you want – and need.

Principally a designer of country gardens, Angel Collins says one of her first questions is how much resource will be available to the garden once it is built. This determines the extent and nature of any hard landscaping, and what plants are used. Set a budget and be realistic about the time and money





## Money Talk

**Every project attracts a unique set of costs, ranging from a couple of thousand pounds to the millions. Whatever the size, obtaining clarity over what will be charged is essential.**

**Do expect quotes for the work, bearing in mind that day rates tend to be higher on smaller jobs, but come down on bigger projects involving larger sums and longer time frames.**

**Make sure you understand the fee structure before work begins. It is not unusual for a deposit to be paid at the outset and then for further sums to be paid at various stages of work. Costs might include travel, materials and ongoing maintenance if the company offers this.**

**Confirm the number of drawings that will be delivered. It is usual to pay for the delivery of each one. Ask for examples to ensure they're up to scratch.**

you can commit, both for the build and in years to come. "You can't put in an amazing but high-maintenance garden and expect the owner to look after it if they're not committed," she says.

Both Andrew and Angel stress that a good working relationship underpins a good garden. "There are so many dimensions to this work, but when you have your first meeting you are already building a professional friendship. You want to really get on with the person you'll be working with. And, as a designer, you want to give your life and soul to the project," Angel explains.

After the first meeting, larger gardens may undergo a topographical survey. This establishes the shape of the garden, which is foremost in the designer's mind when they are designing, and will aid the landscapers who build the garden. "The survey is in my mind at all times," says Angel. "Then you start to draw. You want something right for the countryside and house but that also has an extra-special loveliness about it." Country gardens in particular are influenced by their surrounds, be they pasture, woodland, hillside or water. City gardens might borrow the view of a neighbouring tree or hedge. Good practise will take this into account.

Designers have their individual ways of working. Larger, big-name firms will have a team of staff, and contact with the well-known designer may be limited; small practices will be more intimate. Some specialise in design only, handing over their plans and planting lists and returning at the point of positioning plants if necessary. Others are involved

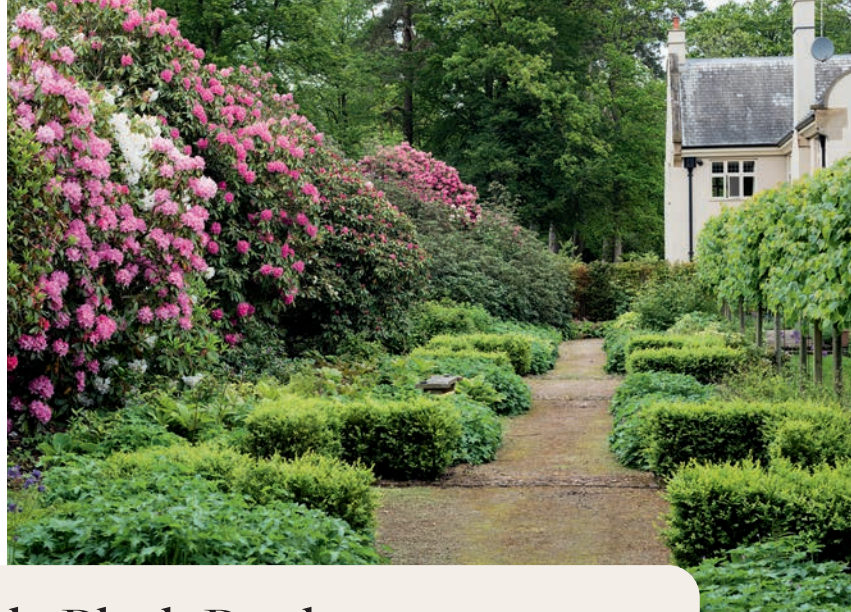
**Top left** For Andrew Duff, who designed this corner, clear communication is key. **Above** A timeless planting scheme with a classical mood, by George Carter.

in the entire process, working with landscapers and gardeners and helping to put in plants. Be clear: at the outset, establish the degree of engagement and what you will be responsible for.

Depending on the commission, it is worth allowing around six months for the process, from appointing the designer to completion. But be prepared to join a waiting list, both for the designer and the preferred landscaping contractor. Much depends on whether you have building work going on elsewhere, since the contractors for this may well also work on the garden. Angel, who visits some gardens once a week, says: "I monitor my time and take on only what I can manage." While the garden



## CHOOSING A DESIGNER



is being built, do allow for some disruption. If you are having building work done, the architectural firm might recommend landscape architects and designers with whom they have worked in the past.

All will agree that the better the communication between them, the better the end result.

Gardens are lasting, personal spaces and it is important to feel completely happy with what you are paying for. Designers do have a stylistic signature, but their primary function is to implement their clients' wishes and tastes in a practical but beautiful way. "I share everything with the client right from the start. I share the design process, which allows the client to feel invested in the design and gives them a chance to communicate what they like and don't like," Andrew explains. ■

For more information: [angelacollins.co.uk](http://angelacollins.co.uk); [andrewduffgardendesign.com](http://andrewduffgardendesign.com); [sgd.org.uk](http://sgd.org.uk)

**Above** In older gardens, a designer can refresh planting and tidy focal points. **Top right** Good design has lasting presence, as in this classic garden by Acres Wild.

## Little Black Book

Selected practices of varying sizes, offering garden styles from classic to contemporary

### Acres Wild

Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith specialise in the design and master planning of larger country gardens in Sussex, Surrey, Kent, Hampshire and abroad. *Tel: 01403 891084; acreswild.co.uk*

### Marian Boswall Landscape Architects

Marian Boswall's commissions range from parkland to private gardens, all undertaken with a respect for the natural world. *Tel: 020 7305 7153; marianboswall.com*

### George Carter Garden Design

Veteran designer specialising in formal spaces inspired by the geometry of 17th-century gardens, an ethic suiting both old and modern. *Tel: 01362 668130; georgecartergardens.co.uk*

### Kate Gould Gardens

Renowned for chic, small, city gardens, especially in London. Larger urban gardens might be formal or more contemporary. *Tel: 01923 839733; kategouldgardens.com*

### Rosebank Landscaping

Matt Keightley is creative director of this firm, offering design and build on mainly urban gardens and public spaces. *Tel: 0203 876 5299; rosebanklandscaping.co.uk*

### James Alexander-Sinclair

A smaller practice with an inimitable designer at the helm, offering classic designs large and small. *Tel: 07515 336356; jamesalexandersinclair.com*

### Jo Thompson Landscape & Garden Design

Known for gently floriferous, winning designs often shown at RHS Chelsea, Jo has an international client list. *Tel: 020 7127 8438; jothompson-garden-design.co.uk*

### Julie Toll Landscape & Garden Design

An experienced designer with a deep interest in the natural world, working in the UK and abroad. *Tel: 01438 310095; julietoll.co.uk*

### Sue Townsend Garden Design

Specialising in simple lines, bold plants and materials sensitive to their surroundings, Sue works across East Anglia and occasionally in London. *Tel: 01728 648790; suetownsendgardendesign.co.uk*

### Butter Wakefield Garden Design

Specialises in bringing a country garden mood to smaller urban spaces, particularly in London but also elsewhere. *Tel: 07973 516149; butterwakefield.co.uk*