



Green fingers



Don't underestimate the humble garden, says Liz Ackerley, winner of last year's Grand Designs Live Garden Designer of the Year award. She tells **Gemma Knight** why outside space is far more than flowerbeds.

Like my garden, but there's a reason that landscape architect and designer Liz Ackerley is a national pioneer in the art of garden design, and I'm not. Liz, director of the Manchester-based Poppyhead Consultancy, is truly a visionary when it comes to developing outside space to achieve its maximum potential – a potential which, I'll freely admit, I had drastically underestimated.

'The underlying purpose of a garden is to provide additional rooms,' she explains. 'It's just as important as the internal space as it should be an extension of the house with a variety of functions; sitting and relaxing, entertaining friends, playing or growing flowers, fruit and vegetables.'

Really, though, it should come as no surprise that Liz is so methodical and insightful when it comes to her chosen profession. She was originally a biological scientist (retraining fourteen years ago as a garden designer then chartered landscape architect), a factor which undoubtedly contributes to her logical and precise approach. Added to this, she avoids the all-too-common megalomania characteristic of many a designer by maintaining an encouragingly balanced attitude towards collaboration, saying 'it's important that the clients are actively involved in the process and I always ensure that there is a detailed brief that captures their ideas, needs, and functional requirements' – though she admits she does prefer some degree of creative autonomy and is 'certainly not one for 'design by committee'!

But overall, as ever, it seems her ability ultimately comes down to passion. She particularly loves the variety afforded by her job, and the fact that it 'was the natural choice, combining science, art and design; all the things I love.' This enthusiasm shines through in her work, not least in the Garden Designer of the Year award she was given at last year's Grand Designs Live event in Birmingham. Her entry,



The Gourmet Retreat, was by turn kitchen, living room, allotment and party venue - a perfect synopsis of the way in which gardens should be as multi-functional as they are

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 — Liz Ackerley

beautiful, with many features having multiple uses. 'For example,' Liz explains, 'the raised beds were mesh gabions containing washed pebbles and bug hotels, and they also tripled up as seating. The wall was clad with black composite decking and incorporated herbs as well as a water feature, while a metal pergola defined the seating area with overhead metal wires, as well as providing an area for climbing fruit and vegetables.'

It goes without saying that Liz is an inherently

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creative person with her own very definite ideas about style. 'My design style is contemporary and modern with a little bit of a twist' she says, 'clean architectural lines, natural or simple materials and dynamic planting design.' It's an approach that Liz defines as 'soft minimalism', tempering rigidity with imaginative planting and achieving a smooth, relaxed finish.

'She became the only garden designer in the North West to have won a Small Business Sunday award'

With her 'strong views on aspects of garden and landscape design', Liz knew it was only by setting up her own business that she'd be able to stay true to her design ethos - though she's the first to admit that it hasn't been easy. 'I had always wanted my own business and to be a master of my own destiny,' she says. 'At first it's a little overwhelming and you need to be very disciplined about how you spend your time. Being strategic, entrepreneurial and having a handle on your business focus can be challenging. I think the biggest thing is to ensure

that you are always driving the business forward with a strong sense of where you're going.'

Luckily, it was her diverse range of skills and experience coupled with sheer determination which allowed her to make it a success, an achievement recently rewarded when she became the only garden designer in the North West to have won a Small Business Sunday award, Theo Paphitis' promotion of fledgling companies via the medium of Twitter. 'As a small business it is really important to have a forum and community to bounce ideas off and the SBS network is a great way of doing that,' she says. 'It's given me confidence to move forward and not be afraid to push myself towards new contacts and opportunities.'

Clearly, Liz is doing something right, and it seems that promoting the garden as an extension of the home – used not just for flowers and barbecues, but as a hugely adaptable, multi-purpose space – is a huge element in her revolutionising the idea of the outdoors. We're thoroughly inspired by her neat, eclectic style and Japanese aesthetic - although, all things considered, we could probably take or leave the bug hotels. ■
(poppyheadconsultancy.com)



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