



Veronica Mackinnon talks to Ben Johns of Bespoke Landscapes about his RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show experience

stealing the show

Bespoke Landscapes is a family-run Hampshire landscaping company, established in 2003 and based in Hedge End and Curdridge, and undertaking projects in the surrounding counties and beyond. Owner Ben Johns has more than 20 years' experience in the landscaping and construction industry but 2012 was special for Ben and his team; this was the year when Ben's dreams and aspirations became real and he designed and built his own garden at the RHS Hampton Court Palace Flower Show.

There seems little point in me telling you about this amazing experience, so I am leaving it up to Ben to share it with you in his own words...

2012 is the first time I have designed and exhibited my own show garden. I called the garden *The Poet's Retreat*, the inspiration for which came from a range of garden writings and poetry. I wanted the space to feel like part of a larger garden, a garden "room" that is peaceful and quiet, a place to relax and be inspired.

"However, there was nothing relaxing about constructing the garden! Months of preparation were necessary in order to get the application approved by the Royal Horticultural Society, to secure sponsorship, to source materials and plants, not to mention the amount of form filling we had to do! Here is my diary..."

September 2011: Basic sketches are made and 3D concept drawings are created.



We were delighted to discover we had been awarded a silver medal, which is an outstanding achievement for a first attempt! Although it has been exhausting, we have loved the experience and will definitely be returning next year with another garden



October 2011: Initial application forms and 'Clients' Brief' submitted to the RHS.

November 2011: Cost estimates for the garden are drawn up, and contact made with a variety of local and national suppliers to find sponsor, either to supply materials and plants, or to assist with covering the cost of the garden as a whole.

January 2012: Meetings with potential sponsors.

February 2012: 'Garden Exhibitors' Ceremony' at the RHS Halls in Westminster, London. This is an opportunity for the exhibitors to meet with organisers of Hampton Court Flower Show and find out more information about the process so that questions can be answered. Finally heard from RHS that our garden has been accepted and we have been offered a plot at the show!

March 2012: Bradstone confirm they would like to be the main sponsors for the garden, which is great news! Not only will they be sponsoring us financially, but will also supply us with the paving required for the garden, Bradstone Old Town®, as well as clothing for all of our construction team and they will be designing and producing our leaflets for us, which is an unexpected bonus!

April 2012: Other sponsorships finalised with Hampshire companies: Elliott Brothers Ltd agree to sponsor some of the materials required for the garden, Equestrian Fencing Ltd are supplying the Oak pergolas and Gaze Buxvill have agreed to provide us with two

gorgeous hand-crafted benches on loan for the duration of the show.

May 2012: Visit Hampton Court to see our plot – a simple rectangle of soil and it looks tiny but also perfect as we are right in front of one of the antique brick walls, which will be a fantastic backdrop through our garden gate. Also start on design of the garden leaflets which will be amazing – Bradstone is even sending a photographer to the garden during the final days of construction so we can have the finished garden shown on the leaflet!

June 16, 2012: Hedging plants pruned to perfection ready for delivery to the show in a couple of weeks. Getting all of the box hedging trimmed was a bit of a lengthy task – almost 40 metres of it in all, not to mention the cones and bulbs!

June 19, 2012: First day of build up on site.

Most of the next few days are spent digging out the footings and constructing the huge wall which serves as a backdrop for the whole garden. The style of the wall – Flemish Bond – was chosen to reflect the brickwork at Hampton Court Palace so the garden would fit in with its surroundings and reflect the brief of being a traditional garden.

June 22, 2012: Planted the perimeter horabean hedging. Luckily the rain seems to be holding off at Hampton Court – unlike the rest of the UK.

June 29, 2012: A last push to get the plants in and the paving ▶

► finished because the photographer for the leaflet coming this morning so we need to ensure everything is ready for his arrival. Not quite finished so had to fudge it but it was ok. Amidst the chaos the benches turned up from Gaze Bursill. The rest of the afternoon is spent laying out and installing the plants and putting up the oak pergolas.

July 1, 2012: Finishing touches and a bit of additional planting added. Had to leave the stand when the assessors came at 2.35pm to examine our garden.

July 2, 2012: Press Day. The judges came around this morning to see if they agree with how the assessors graded the garden yesterday. Lots of press and celebrities around today and I managed to get photos of some famous faces in the garden! At around 4pm the judges brought round the medals. We were delighted to discover we have been awarded a silver medal, which is an outstanding achievement for a first attempt! The gala evening, albeit a bit wet, finished with a spectacular firework display over the Long Water. What a day!

July 3-8, 2012: Despite the weather, the crowds enjoy all the sights and sounds of the show. *The Peter's Retreat* is favoured by many of the traditionalist gardeners due to its 'of-days-gone-by' style and visitors loved our selection of plants, especially the stand-out pink Peony (*Paeonia Lactiflora* 'Bowl of Beauty') and the pretty Echinacea (*Echinacea purpurea* 'Baby White Swan'). There are many wonderful comments about the garden from visitors and experts alike and the garden even makes it on to the BBC highlights programme with BBC *Gardener's World* presenter, Joe Swift, sitting on my very garden!

July 9, 2012: Sadly, we now have to dismantle the garden, which seems such a shame after all of the time and hard work that has gone in to it. Some materials and plants from the garden have been donated to the local charities collecting on site for use within local community projects across the UK. The show is cleared away for another year and although it has been exhausting, we have loved the experience and will definitely be returning next year with another garden.

Well done Ben and the Bespoke Landscaping team! A fantastic result to achieve a silver medal in the Queen's Diamond Jubilee year and we shall look out for you next time.



factfile

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