

THE OUTDOOR ROOM

One of Surrey's most respected garden designers, **Moira Farnham** is also the co-founder of the garden design college at Painshill Park in Cobham. LEIGH CLAPP discovers more about her celebrated work

Photos by Leigh Clapp



'I always try to marry the house
and garden together in my designs'



Above: In this courtyard, Moira has created year-round interest with clipped buxus and lavender looking attractive even through winter

Below: The design in this garden includes a prettily planted gravel section
Right: Layered trees, shrubs and herbaceous planting keep the interest going



CREATIVITY is second nature to Moira Farnham and it was clear from an early age that her career would revolve around artistic pursuits. Indeed, she has spent her entire working life in the design field.

Prior to becoming a garden designer, known for her work on the tiniest of spaces right through to expansive acreages, Moira was a senior costume designer for Thames Television and a stage manager and actress in the theatre. However, gardening was always part of her life and when Thames TV underwent budgetary constraints a change of career led to a fresh start.

People come with a wide range of ability – all we ask is that each student is deeply interested about gardens

“My father was a very keen gardener and my aunt, a florist, had trained under Constance Spry,” says Moira, who lives in Camberley. “I do have very early memories of the two of them walking through the garden, with my father referring to the plants by their common names and his sister

echoing their name in Latin, almost like a prayer. It was mysterious and magical.”

The interest continued when Moira set out on her own in early adulthood. “I was definitely bitten by the gardening bug. By the time I was 21, I had joined the RHS and was going to Chelsea – even though I was living in a tiny flat with no garden,” she smiles. Later on, when she did have her own garden, it became a pastime for when she wasn’t away from home filming.

A new path

Frustrated, however, by the reducing budgets and diminishing freedom to

design creative costumes, a chance glance at an advert in the RHS magazine for a garden design course at the Botanic Gardens at Kew became an impetus to change.

“It was a moment of revelation – I had never realised that gardens and design could be put together to structure a

career,” she says. “I knew as soon as I started training that I’d found a career that was a perfect fit.”

Moira’s designs showcase her love and knowledge of achieving the balance between structure and informality.

“I try not to have a ‘style’ but I am drawn to a strong mathematical geometry for the ground plan, overlaid with exuberant romantic planting, which creates a dynamic tension,” she explains. “This is very much in line with the arts and crafts movement.

“I am inspired by the natural world. I love the microcosm and macrocosm of nature: the infinite variety, yet all from the same pattern book – that endless reinvention, random and chaotic but somehow ordered and refined.”

Moira has designed more than 300 gardens in the south-east, tackling all shapes and sizes, and enjoys the diversity. Throughout each project, she maintains a close working relationship with her clients and the majority of her commissions are generated by word of mouth.

“I prefer to work for individual clients in



Above left: Tulips are a favourite of Moira's, and now is the time to plant them for a spring display

Above right: Liquidambar, with its contrasting shades, is one of her top choices for autumn

Below left: Beautiful pink peonies give delicate beauty in a summer garden

Below right: Moira's designs show her love of balancing structure and informality



a domestic setting, helping them to realise their ambitions for their garden," she says. "I always try to marry the house and garden together, so that the style of the house is reflected in the garden and the materials are repeated or complemented.

"The locality must also be taken into account, so that the garden fits comfortably into its own environment, respecting the soil, the aspect and drainage. This in turn should lead to gardens that are sustainable and good for wildlife as well as people."

Characteristic to the designs is a sense of developing vistas and separating areas, encouraging owners to use the garden as a social space for eating and entertaining, strolling and enjoying.

"I like to open and close views, framing and manipulating the space, so that the owner can't see everything at once, creating a need to go out and explore the garden," says Moira. "For me, it is crucial to offer choices so that you don't merely retrace your footsteps but follow alternative routes through the garden. A glimpse of a summerhouse roof or the glint of water

acts as lures to get everyone engaged.

"In short, a well-designed garden effectively becomes an outdoor room, adding quality and value for the owners of the property."

Moira's planting palette is extensive, depending on the conditions and vision required. Year-round interest is provided by favourites such as vibrant tulips in spring, peonies and lavender in summer, autumn colour from viburnum and liquidambar or cornus Midwinter Fire lit against the low light in winter. Layered designs with trees, shrubs and herbaceous plantings continue to evolve and mature over the years.

Teaching at Painshill

As well as running her own busy practice, Moira is also the co-founder and principal of the Garden Design School based at Painshill Landscape gardens in Cobham.

Set up with her colleague, Robin Templar Williams, it offers short courses through to a professional diploma for those wishing to engage in a career in garden design. The majority of the

teaching is undertaken by Moira and Robin, who are both registered members of the Society of Garden Designers and have designed and built award-winning gardens at the RHS Chelsea and Hampton Court flower shows.

"We are passionate about training future garden designers with a course that covers everything the industry wants – from design principles and practical techniques to business skills," says Moira.

"People come with a wide range of ability. Typically, they are multi-tasking adults with plenty of drive looking to develop a new career. All we ask is that each student is deeply interested about gardens.

"The school is an amazing counterpoint to my design work, a cross-fertilisation of ideas and a truly symbiotic experience."

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