

# Cultivating TALENT

For the last 15 years, the London College of Garden Design has been at the top of its game – and it has a raft of successful graduates to show for it

WORDS: NINA MASON



“In the 15 years since the college was founded, it has become known for producing a long list of reputable garden designers”

**F**ive gold medals, two best in category awards, one bronze medal and an RHS feature garden – that’s the impressive list of achievements for graduates of the London College of Garden Design at this year’s RHS Chelsea Flower Show alone.

“It’s an incredible haul for our graduates,” says Andrew Wilson, one of the founding directors. “Each year, we have those success stories,

and it builds that full character of the college – that it’s not just about teaching, but about involvement with the wider profession.”

That’s why, when choosing its tutors, the college only works with those who are also practitioners – to ensure its students are learning from those who are practicing what they preach.

“That’s not to denigrate

teaching but because we’re looking for somebody who is designing and is able to share and encourage students and give that connection in the profession.”

It seems to be working. In the 15 years since the college was founded, it has become known for producing a long list of reputable garden designers, some of whom even return as guest lecturers such as Tom Massey and Harry Holding.

And it’s determined to maintain its reputation. Garden designer Nina Baxter has recently joined Wilson and fellow founder Andrew Fisher Tomlin as a director to ensure the college continues to evolve and adapt to the industry’s changing needs. All three have a longstanding passion for teaching – which is how the college was originally founded.

#### Right place, right time

Wilson had been teaching garden design since 1984, having been introduced to the Inchbald School of Design by lifelong friend Peter Thurman. Discovering how much he enjoyed it, Wilson started fitting ▶



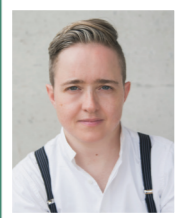
Andrew Fisher Tomlin, Nina Baxter  
and Andrew Wilson



## What is required for training the NEXT GENERATION OF GARDEN DESIGNERS?

### Charlotte Harris

Before we met and while we were training as designers, both Hugo and I spent time gaining insight into practical construction – he was a labourer, and I did a landscape construction NVQ. This was invaluable to grasp the practical considerations of designing a garden, from levels to sequencing to detailing to soil handling. Contractors that we work with continue to generously share their experience and expertise, for which we are hugely grateful. I would encourage students to consider practical site experience as much as, for example, planting for show gardens, as part of their development skills.



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### Manoj Malde

Sustainability must be at the heart of design. Future designers must be trained so that sustainability is second nature as the process of design begins. It is interlinked with impact of construction methods, materials, plants and planting methods.

Is it necessary to always start with a blank canvas? Understanding the existing space, what can be maintained, re-incorporated into the design, reused and repurposed will help greatly with designing gardens that reduce negative impact on the environment.

As part of their training, the use of a carbon footprint calculator will help things like efficiency, waste reduction and cost saving etc.

### Adam Vetere

Since graduating in 2019, the world has changed significantly and costs have risen dramatically – there is often a sense of entitlement, which is borne out of unrealistic expectations from clients. To help new designers succeed in this industry, there should be a greater focus on building relationships with contractors and clients, through closer collaboration, efficient client and contractor selection processes, the managing of expectations from the first meeting, clear and regular communication with all parties throughout the design process, and an honest appraisal of budget expectations with all parties involved from day one!



“There’s been a shift in those coming onto the course to be primarily planting designers and working for landscape architects, – it’s become a specialism”

Andrew Fisher Tomlin

his freelance work as a landscape architect around teaching before being offered the opportunity to run the course in 1989.

He wanted to buy the college, though – something which Inchbald wasn’t interested in at the time. So, he resigned in 2003 to pursue setting up his own. While he searched for somewhere, Wilson took on the role of running a course at Merrist Wood College, where Charlotte Harris was one of his students. He juggled this alongside teaching postgraduate Landscape Architecture for Kathryn Moore at Birmingham City University and the Garden and Landscape Architecture programme at the University of Greenwich as well as his own design work.

Exhausted riding home on his motorcycle from Birmingham one day, he reluctantly decided to attend a launch party of the RHS Chelsea Flower Show in King’s Road. That’s where he started talking to Fisher Tomlin, who told him that he’d been teaching at the English Gardening School and was looking to purchase it.

Fisher Tomlin had spent 10 years in retail banking before studying horticulture at Askham Bryan College and setting up a design and build business in London. He’d been asked to teach horticulture and construction to students at various colleges but felt as though it was an “afterthought”.

He sold the construction business in 2004 and carried on working with Dan Bowyer, who had just joined the company, running their own design

practice. This freed up some time to consider other opportunities, such as how to enhance the way garden design was being taught.

Wilson was already running a venture with prolific landscape contractor Mark Gregory called The Tutor Group, responding to people’s requests for areas of training rather than running an official course. Fisher Tomlin joined this, with the three evolving it into the London College of Garden Design.

Gregory says he was eager to share knowledge and mentor those coming up through the industry. Though he is no longer a director, having left when he felt he wasn’t able to give the role as much time as it deserved, Gregory continues to teach as a guest lecturer which he finds “exhilarating” and says it’s “humbling” to have helped to shape the careers of designers such as Tom Massey and Emily Erlam.

“What we aim to set up was something that’s really pure and very top end and delivered by some great people. It’s a responsibility to give really concise, accurate conversations of the moment,” says Gregory.

### A new home

They needed to find somewhere to do this, though. The non-negotiables were that it would be linked to a garden and would be close to public transport. Regent’s American College London at the bottom of Regent’s Park fit the bill. They ran an open day and carried out interviews for prospective students before running their first year of the garden design course in 2009 with 16 students, including John Davies and Henrietta Murray-Wicks. “It’s incredible that we had great students in our first year who have gone on to be successful garden designers and ambassadors for the school,” says Wilson.

The college’s initial success hit a bump in the road when they found out that the American College was expanding, and they’d therefore need to find a new base; but it turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as this is how they ended up moving to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. “It ticked all the boxes – it was a garden, it was accessible, it was world famous,” says Wilson.

After a bit of back and forth to confirm, the college started from its new home in 2011, taking on a member of Kew staff as part of its annual contract. In the first year, this happened to be Richard Wilford, who is now Kew’s in-house designer.

The college’s reputation was already starting to grow in the industry, and the need to build onto its offering was becoming apparent. “Our waiting list was expanding, as was our market awareness. Andrew Fisher Tomlin had been working on a planting design programme and so he started to get that underway, which broadened our approach.”

Fisher Tomlin says this diploma was to look at planting design in more detail and it’s now been running for 12 years, from January to July. “There’s been a shift in those coming onto the course to be primarily planting designers and working for landscape architects, such as Alexa Ryan Mills – it’s become a specialism.”

### Learning to evolve

Five years ago, the college also launched its construction design certificate, held from September through to December. Wilson says many colleges weren’t addressing this area in their garden design programmes and, as an adjudicator for the Society of Garden Designers, he thought this could prove useful.

“We cannot just offer that initial design training, but we also need to offer the continuing professional development like planting design and construction design,” adds Fisher Tomlin.

Its garden design diploma, running from September through to July, was still growing too. The ▶



## LCGD alumni



HELEN OLNEY WITH RHS DIRECTOR GENERAL CLARE MATTERTON

“[ANDREW] STARTED TALKING ABOUT STORYTELLING WITH PLANTS AND CREATING AN ATMOSPHERE - AND I JUST KNEW I WANTED TO BE THERE.”

## Helen Olney

Course: Planting Design • Graduated: 2021

It was at the start of an unusual year for the London College of Garden Design that Helen Olney started studying the planting design course. Four years ago, just before the pandemic hit, she started attending the lectures at Kew, having moved in with her partner and discovered a love of plants when revamping their back garden.

While trying to decide which college to choose, she went for a coffee with Andrew Fisher Tomlin. “He started talking about storytelling with plants and creating an atmosphere - and I just knew I wanted to be there.” So, she cancelled appointments with the other colleges and signed up to the LCGD.

But a national lockdown forced all her classes to go online. The change certainly didn’t impede Olney. “I was totally absorbed by all my college projects; it was the most wonderful distraction, and it turned out quite well, I think.”

That’s an understatement. The garden designer, who also works part time as creative director at the BBC Sounds, dived in at the deep end with her RHS Chelsea Flower Show debut this year, picking up not only a Gold medal but also the Best Sanctuary Garden Award.

She’d won a competition for college alumni through grant-making scheme Project Giving Back to design a Chelsea garden and, having gone straight back to working for the BBC after completing her course, Olney leapt at the opportunity for a new project.

“I hadn’t learned all the 3D software yet, so I ended up making a Play Doh model of the garden on my kitchen table to work out the spacing, the proportions and the views. Then I took a photo of the model and sketched over it. That was my submission for the competition. But I got through that, and Andrew Fisher Tomlin supported me throughout, pairing me with Ross Conquest and his team to build the garden which was brilliant, I couldn’t have done it without them. It was a big team effort.”

Olney is in the process of relocating the Burma Skincare Initiative Spirit of Partnership Garden to Dulwich College, with the new space set to open in September.



## AD PAGE



class size had doubled to 30 and its waiting list was steadily increasing. “We realised that if we didn’t do something, then we were going to be passing on students to other places when we’d rather teach them ourselves,” says Wilson.

Then the pandemic hit, and the college moved over to Zoom, despite vowing to always provide face-to-face training. Rather than hinder them, though, Wilson and Fisher Tomlin found the platform to be effective and saw it as an opportunity. “We could share a tutorial and take control of someone else’s screen; it became much more interactive.”

At the same time, applications “exploded” during lockdown. People who had been putting it off decided to take the plunge. So,



KATHRYN COX - THE FLOWER POWER FIELD

the college decided to evolve, continue to take on 30 face-to-face students for its garden design diploma as well as an extra 10 online spaces.

“That proved very valuable – not just in terms of being able to take on a larger number of students and start working on the waiting list, but also because it brought us international students again,” says Wilson, who explains that this refreshes and enriches the course.

They’ve now taught students in France, Italy, the Dominican Republic, Maine and even one in California who was getting up at 2am for lectures. Last year (2023) marked the first year that an online student won the Top Student award too.

It’s proved so successful that the college is now moving its construction design certificate to be solely online this year, led by Paul Hensey. “It fits in better with people’s careers; they find it more flexible,” says Wilson.

As for the garden design diploma, this will be undergoing another transition in the coming months, with James Aldridge taking over from Andrew Wilson as course leader from September 2025.

When Wilson’s wife was diagnosed with cancer in 2018, he took a step back from the practice he’d set up with Gavin McWilliam, ▶

## What is required for training the NEXT GENERATION OF GARDEN DESIGNERS?

### Adam White

With more garden designers now being invited to work on community spaces and public realm projects, it’s essential they understand the legal professional practice implications, especially when you don’t know who the end user is going to be.



We find career changing students bring a diverse range of complementary skills but after their academic studies are complete, they still need to continue with their CPD. This will help them gain the essential foundation knowledge in contracts, statutory legislation, CDM health & safety whilst ensuring they understand the various insurance policies.

So, rather than setting up as a sole practitioner after graduating, we always advise them to get work experience in an established design studio and consider becoming a member of either the SGD or the Landscape Institute. As a member of the Landscape Institute, they will have the opportunity to continue to study whilst working and then join the Pathway to Chartership. This takes lots of time, study and experience but to become a chartered professional is still the most useful practical highlight of my career.



### Hugo Bugg

I’d like the educational establishments to help set up new designers for commercial success by having conversations about profitability, whether they’re planning to work for a practice or step out solo. Design ability; planting passion; human connection with clients and

collaborators; making thoughtful, sustainable, resilient, and often experimental work – all these are at the bedrock of our practice. At the same time, everyone needs a salary, and salaries come from delivering work profitably. Profit allows us to learn, play, experiment, make pay rises, give paid sabbaticals and much more.

### Liz Nicholson

Garden design is often seen as a highly creative job but in reality, today’s designers have a tangible responsibility to create projects that are light touch on climate and nature. A clear understanding of existing site soils, water relations across the landscape, biodiversity, and connectivity to surrounding habitats, not to mention the carbon impact of construction is imperative in today’s modern garden designers. Rather than being restrictive, this wider worldly responsibility comes with a wonderful opportunity to bring our knowledge of design, science, and commercial understanding together to form innovative and exciting spaces for the future.





LCGD alumni



**“HAVING THAT SUPPORT GROUP REALLY PROPELLED ME TO GO FORWARD AND SEIZE OPPORTUNITIES THAT CAME MY WAY”**

*Harry Holding*

Course: Garden Design diploma • Graduated: 2019

**H**arry Holding has fit a lot into the five years since he graduated. His practice, Harry Holding Studio, has grown to include two other designers and, earlier this year, he launched his own professional aftercare business, LDN Horticulture.

Last year, Holding won the People's Choice Award at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show for his first exhibit, the School Food Matters Garden. The RHS invited him back this year to design the first feature garden “designed by children, for children” - the RHS No Adults Allowed Garden.

Then there's the growing list of awards to his name. After winning Top Student of the Year at the college, he became one of Pro Landscaper's 30 Under 30: The Next Generation winners in 2020. He has since won multiple SGD Awards, including one earlier this year in the Big Ideas, Small Budget category.

“Studying the garden design diploma at LCGD was a transformative step in my career,” says Holding. “Having worked in the horticultural industry for a number of years, I came to college hungry for knowledge and with a drive to become a designer.”

He says it was “masterfully covered” by the college. But what surprised him most was the network he realised that he'd developed over the course.

“From expert mentors to fellow students - having that support group really propelled me to go forward and seize opportunities that came my way. There's no hiding from the fact it is a rigorous course - all consuming, one might say. I'm fortunate to return to the college as a visiting tutor and stay in touch with all the fabulous teachers.”

who he'd taught at Greenwich. He then committed more to the college which had more of a set timetable, supporting McWilliam's practice and taking on studio work where he can. Their partnership continues in this way today, and though his wife is now seven years on from the original diagnosis through immunotherapy, Wilson is keen to continue to keep that balance - “to find time for us, for the college, and for design work.” So, Aldridge will manage the day to day of the diploma, with Wilson still being heavily involved.

**Graduate aftercare**

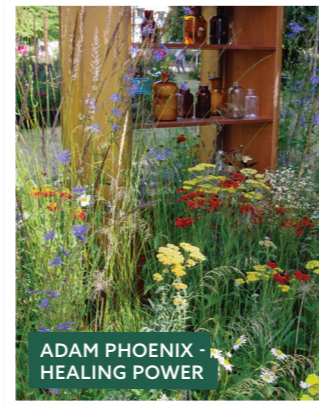
New director Baxter, on the other hand, is looking to develop further how the college looks after its graduates. She arranged a competition this year, for instance, for recent graduates to design and build an Asteraceae-themed border at this year's RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival which was an “enormous success”. Now, she's looking at a “graduate question time” initiative to make it even easier for them to ask questions in their first year after leaving the college as garden design can be a “lonely profession”. “Our strength is our graduates - the fact that they are so good but also so positive about the college.”

Baxter joined as the course leader for the planting design diploma, taking over from Fisher Tomlin. She's eager to continue to build on the success of Wilson,

**“The college has generated a huge momentum. Not only is there a growing body of excellent graduates, but there are also incredibly professional tutors at the top of their game”**

Nina Baxter

Fisher Tomlin and Gregory. “The college has generated a huge momentum. Not only is there a growing body of excellent graduates, but there are also incredibly professional tutors at the top of their game. I'm now looking at where we go from here.”



Moving the construction design certificate to being hosted online has freed up teaching in the autumn, so the college has launched a selection of short courses such as a series on “The Business of Garden Design”.

And whilst Baxter says her first year as director has been spent “making minor adjustments and not breaking anything”, she's now working on introducing a horticulture qualification. “A lot of people who come onto the planting design course do the RHS Level 2 in Horticulture, which is the best that there is; but it does contain a lot of horticulture that they might never use. So, I'd like to offer a ‘horticulture for designers’ certificate geared towards what designers really need to know and understand.”

She and Fisher Tomlin are also both exploring how to incorporate sustainability further into the courses. Since Baxter came on board, Fisher Tomlin's new title is director of environmental design, which comes from a passion that comes “full circle back to horticulture”. “There are some amazing people in our industry who are pushing the environmental agenda, and I'm interested in that and how we can



**“As the profession changes, we will change, always striving to provide graduates with the skills necessary to be able to work from the word go, as soon as they leave college.”**

Andrew Wilson

create much more sustainable designs in our work,” he says.

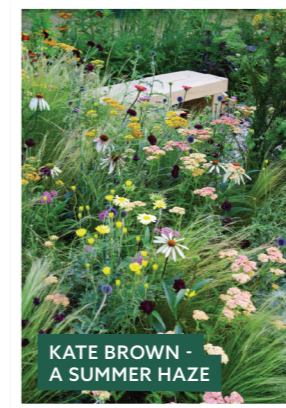
“We've got to be at the forefront of ensuring that we're moving towards sustainability and not going backwards. We're the heart of that and it's a really exciting place to be. There's a responsibility around it as well, so we've been talking about how we can ensure that sustainability underpins everything that we talk about from the start and that there has to be a rationale behind the choices people make.”

**International influence**

Fisher Tomlin also teaches for six weeks of the year at the college's partner institution in Melbourne. “The Australians are way ahead of the UK on sustainability and understanding climate change, so it's a joy to be able to teach and talk with really engaged

students over there as well.”

The partnership came about when Fisher Tomlin met Brent Reid at the Australian Garden Show. He'd been aware of Reid through mutual acquaintances, and they ended up designing and building



a garden next to each other. Reid, a horticulturist with a successful design business, told Fisher Tomlin that he wished they had a programme

like the one in London there in Australia. This snowballed into the two and Wilson setting up LCGD Melbourne.

“There's more of a hunger there for a two-year course. So, we teach almost a combination of the garden design and planting design diplomas and the construction design certificate - we do the whole lot in one go, in one course that's 50% longer than the garden design course in London.”

They opened the doors three days before lockdown, so “the first two years were tough”. But it's now “turned a corner” and is attracting talent from all over Australia, with half of the students studying online.

Whether in London or Melbourne, the college seems to make its mark - but it's clearly not resting on its laurels. “If you're a successful athlete or football team, then you're

trying to work on your success and maintain that success - to keep that quality,” says Wilson. “So, Nina, Andrew and I will constantly have an eye on that aspect of quality and attracting fabulous students - because it's the quality of the students that we bring in that forms that success, starting with their applications and their interviews. And as the profession changes, we will change, always striving to provide graduates with the skills necessary to be able to work from the word go, as soon as they leave college.”

“The graduates are our best salespeople,” adds Fisher Tomlin. “As much as our graduates get the gold medals, that's a small proportion of our graduate base who are out there running professional companies and doing extremely well.” Their success speaks for itself.