

The prize-winning design created by Jim Thompson, inset, for last year's Chelsea Flower Show



Want to change your life as well as the landscape? Annie Gatti meets the designers who ditched their day jobs to nurture their passion for plants

Two years after moving from London to West, Jim Thompson, 45, found himself travelling back to town for two days a week at the English Gardening School in Chelsea, where she had enrolled for the one-year diploma in garden design.

Formerly a drama teacher at a prep school, she had given up work to raise her two children, but, as they became less dependent – they are now 16 and 12 – she realised that she would like to get out of the house and back to work. "I had always wanted to do garden design," she says. "But, when I was leaving my further education, I didn't even know it existed as a career." She joined the English Gardening School because it had a good reputation and a rigorous course, but also because it required only two days away from home. "I could attend two-day classes. The rest of the week would be to attend my children."

That was in 2005. Thompson's interests in time and money – the course costs about £3,000 – has recently paid off, as she has a thriving practice (www.gardens-design.co.uk), with 17 projects on the go and two assistants. Last year, she won best urban garden at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Kate Gould began her career in garden design when she was 16, when she was in her twenties. Work in a series of dual-and-administrative jobs, she had a nervous moment one Friday afternoon and decided that other work was not the way forward. Rather than, the company she was working for had placed the final colours in the then's landscape, and she had been sent there to sort out some papers. "As I stood there, I suddenly realised that to do something meaningful, I had to do it myself. Gould's first thought was of getting her own practice, and a qualification from a

university or her local further education college in Harrow, north London, the one-year diploma in garden design and planting jumped out at her. It was an evening course, which would allow her to keep up the day job, in the school and home alone. Initially, that was exactly what she wanted to do. Gould, now 46, topped up her qualification by taking a correspondence course with the designer David Stevens (www.davidstevens.co.uk), which sharpened her conceptual skills and spatial awareness. She then set up her own practice (www.gardensdesign.com). "I got an ad in a gardening magazine and got my first client," she says. "Then, by 2006, I was taking on a job that she couldn't do, and that produced a chain of customers."

Thirteen years later, as she prepares for her 10th Chelsea show garden, the former teacher finds the course. "I love the creative thing when you talk with the clients. You put something down on paper and a few months later, the garden's built, the plants are in and it's looking lovely."

The attraction of being a designer is apparent, especially to those who stick to office life. It's a job that takes your mind, fires your imagination and leaves you with the satisfaction of having created something that will draw your clients deeper into their gardens, emotionally and physically. And, given that billions spend a whopping £1.2 billion on garden design a year, there is a healthy market.

Learning to be a garden designer is not the becoming a doctor or architect, in that there are no professional qualifications or industry standard required to enter the practice. So why bother taking a course?

"You might think that having a good eye for design, spatial awareness, and a sound knowledge of plants is enough, but these attributes will be tested on your course, and a qualification from a



Up the garden path

Former brickfield pupil Lauren Underhill's garden at Chelsea in 2008



Nigel James gave up his job as a lawyer to create gardens



Another Chelsea design, by Kate Gould

"AS I STOOD SORTING PAPERS AT A FILING CABINET IN THE MEN'S LAVATORIES, I SUDDENLY REALISED I HAD TO DO SOMETHING MORE CREATIVE"

imagined school will give clients an idea, help you to establish contacts and teach you how to run a business. Getting the last part right is essential, as this is a business in which only a handful earn six-figure salaries and £10,000 a year is considered respectable. Now, then, do you choose the perfect course? There is a bewildering range, with different design and horticultural elements, offered by colleges, universities, private schools and distance and online learning agencies. Do your homework first. "Generally speaking, a lot of them don't concentrate enough on the business side," says Julie Sargent, a designer and student adviser for the Society of Garden Designers (SGD).

There's a list of college offering courses on the SGD's website (<http://sgd.org.uk>), as well as a useful checklist of things to consider, from the number of hours spent actually designing to the variety of projects, computer-aided design skills and external accreditation. You should also look at the college's website, including its design and landscaping design, and how many of their graduates are working successfully in the business.

Courses taught online, where you have virtual classrooms and tutorials, and a tutor whom you can contact by email, are the most recent development. Obviously, they solve the problem of travelling long distances, but it is essential to be sure whether virtual studies sessions can be as challenging and instructive as face-to-face ones.

The cost ranges from a few hundred pounds for distance learning to more than £10,000 for a diploma at the prestigious Goldsmith School of Design, in central London. The previous pricing reflects the intensity of the course: for days a week at site, rather than the usual two.

For Nigel James, 41, who is holding a show garden at the RGS Hampton Court Flower Show this year, finding the right course was essential. A father of two young children, he had given up a lucrative job as a lawyer at Gough to do an RGS course in horticulture at his local adult education college in south-east London.

While there, he decided to pursue garden design, and next applied for a diploma at the brickfield, which he completed in 2008. "I wanted to know that I could go out and provide my services," he says. He took a job with a firm of landscape architects as a student, and now, two years on from graduating, is up and running (www.nigeljamesgardens.com). "It is not making as much money as I did as a lawyer, but if the business continues to grow at its current rate, I'm confident that I can make a good living."

Perhaps the greatest skill is something that can't be taught. As Andrew Wilson, principal of the London College of Garden Design, says: "You've got to be able to make things happen, to look for work as well as deal with those who've been promised. You can't afford to be a shrinking violet."

WHERE TO STUDY
 The RGS Hampton Court Flower Show this year, finding the right course was essential. A father of two young children, he had given up a lucrative job as a lawyer at Gough to do an RGS course in horticulture at his local adult education college in south-east London.

Guest lectures include such notable past pupils as Luciana Klotzki and Marcus Burnett. Both are showing at Chelsea this year. The one-year diploma in garden design (£2,000) and the post-graduate diploma in garden design (£2,500) are set for the autumn. A part-time three-year online diploma (£4,000) is offered for those who can't make it to London. • • • 02070078111; info@ltd.ac.uk

London College of Garden Design, London While there are about 20 courses on offer covering specific skills such as computer-aided design (CAD), as well as evening lectures. The diploma in garden design costs £4,000. www.ltd.ac.uk

English Gardening School, London Offers the one-year diploma in garden design costs £3,000 – a good value when you consider the calibre of the tutors (Clare West, Julie Tull, Andy Ingeant, Thomas Gurney). • • • 02075614441; info@engishgardenschool.co.uk

RGS Hampton Court Palace, Surrey The school's 20th-century garden area where you learn to practice as part of the one-year professional diploma in garden design (£7,750). The school offers short courses, too, including one-week introduction to garden design this summer (300), due to be confirmed. 02070301007; info@rsgs.ac.uk

Oxford College of Garden Design The college has now gone virtual, and its next one-year garden design diploma (£4,000) – learning via e-learning, in online classrooms, a gallery and a forum – starts on April 30. www.oxfordgardenschool.co.uk

Research College, Northwich, Cheshire The five-year foundation degree in garden and landscape design, which includes CAD training as well as business and project management modules, costs £1,375 per year. 021254241; research.ac.uk

OTHER USEFUL CONTACTS
 The Royal Horticultural Society has a variety of correspondence courses (www.rhs.org.uk), as does the Learning Curve (www.learningcurve.org). To find courses in your area, visit www.garden.org.uk; for further education, try www.academy.org.uk.

ST See more of Thompson and Gould's garden designs at www.sundaytimes.co.uk/gardening

WORMALD'S WEEK

There is still time to plant onion sets for harvesting in late summer and early autumn. Choose a reliable variety such as 'Autumn Gold Improved' or 'Stungarter Starburst' and bury the sets in a sunny corner with well-drained soil, spacing them 4in apart – the planted tips should be just visible at the surface.

Plant the corners of large-flowered gladioli in a sheltered, sunny spot with well-drained soil. Plant 4in-deep and a similar distance apart, as the flowering stems can grow to 4ft tall.

Once the young shoots of brass appear, spread gritty mulch around them to keep slugs at bay. If a frost is predicted, it's worth popping protective cloches over them for the night.

Reader's question

I want to grow carrots, but how can I stop carrot flies ruining them? •

• D Reynolds, Clifton

Low-resistant varieties such as 'Parade', 'Nantes' or 'Resistant' thwart the weevil at the carrot's openings – trying the young seedlings attracts adult carrot flies to the plants. If the pest is present in your area, consider raising carrots under fine-mesh, which acts as a barrier and stops the flies laying their eggs near the carrots (01402 73002, www.greenfinger.co.uk).

gardens@andy-stone.co.uk

GARDEN CUTTINGS

Water worlds
 The writer and photographer Shelia Daniels will be talking about 'Capacity' Brown's use of water in his landscape designs, including 'Barnham and Greenwidge', at the Surrey 10 Downers Show, London EC2, on Wednesday at 8.30pm. Entry £10 (members £5 if booked in advance). 020 7492 2874. www.gardenhistorysociety.org/events

Cut price carnations
 Before Nursery, in Harpenden, near Watlington, Dorset, is holding its annual carnation sale from Saturday with many specimens half price. 0202 875440; mehannery.co.uk

Spring fever
 The Farnham Spring Festival, in Dorset, kicks off on Saturday with a flower show. There will be a gardeners' quarter time on March 26, and walks in local parks. farnham.co.uk

Garden Mail
news@andy-stone.co.uk