

JO THOMPSON

The award-winning garden designer on a childhood divided between Rome and Dorset, loving the New Romantics and creating gardens in which people long to spend time

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Don't be fooled by appearances. Slight, pretty and endlessly charming, Jo Thompson is also one of the most determined people you will ever meet. How else could a divorced mother of two have turned herself into an internationally renowned award-winning garden designer in just 20 years?

Jo learned the importance of hard work from her father, an Italian cocktail waiter from the Rome of *La Dolce Vita* who came to this country in search of adventure and went on to build a chain of Italian restaurants in southwest England. As a child, Jo divided her time between Rome, where she was fascinated by the classical architecture, and school in Poole, Dorset. "I was quite a swotty girl," she says. "At least until the age of 14, when I discovered Simon Le Bon and the New Romantics."

Despite the distractions of Duran Duran, Jo won a place at UCL to read Modern Languages, and had a wonderful time learning about the history, art and literature of Italy and France, as well as grammar and syntax. After graduation she briefly worked for an Italian man who manufactured dresses for the designer Jasper Conran – "I got paid in sample size clothing, which only fitted because I couldn't afford to eat" – then began a PhD at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge exploring the work of Absurdist playwright and novelist Pirandello.

In a plot twist that Pirandello would have appreciated, a lack of funds forced her to switch to teacher training and a brief career in London schools, before marriage and impending motherhood led a pregnant Jo to cross the road from her Maida Vale flat and ask the staff at Clifton Nurseries how she could improve her tiny roof terrace. "It was a lightbulb moment. In just a couple of windy days those guys transformed the blank canvas of our roof into a whole new world, and sowed the seeds of my future."

By the time her baby was six weeks old, Jo was so desperate for a proper garden that she relocated the family to Kent and was soon obsessed with David Austin's rose catalogue and the writings of Christopher Lloyd. A couple of years and another baby later, Jo signed up for the English Gardening School design course and discovered her calling in life.

"In 2000 I designed a garden for a friend, word got around, and everything suddenly snowballed. Since my marriage had

broken up, leaving me with two tiny children to support, I took on every bit of work that came my way. Fortunately, 20 years ago I had more energy."

In a world that includes some pretty big egos wielding the heavy stamp of design, Jo won a loyal client base by creating romantic gardens shaped by gentle interventions. She certainly can produce a slick contemporary design when the setting or the client demands it, but at heart you sense she is a country girl, and the majority of her work has a relaxed feel which is borderline dishevelled.

"You shouldn't look at one of my gardens and immediately know that I made it. It doesn't need to look like it has always been there, but it should look like it could be there forever. My process would be so much quicker if I had a house style, but I just can't do it.

"When I meet a new client I often say I don't know what their garden will look like, but I do know what it will feel like. There will be harmonies of colour and harmonies of architecture, it will suit their way of life, but most of all it will be a warm and friendly place. Maybe that is a legacy of my childhood in Rome, where so much life was lived outside. A good garden is a place where you want to spend time."

Her work is particularly popular with people who work in creative industries themselves, but many of them insist on NDAs so it is her public

work and award-winning show gardens that tend to get featured in the press. She adores the adrenalin rush of the Chelsea Flower Show (and has a shelf full of medals to prove that Chelsea loves her back) and these days is also an RHS judge and member of the RHS Show Gardens Selection Panel. Somehow she also finds time to support a raft of garden-related charities, has a loyal Instagram following who joined her for daily dog walks through the coronavirus lockdown, and launched a tailored bulb subscription service when she realised how many would-be clients couldn't afford a total redesign.

But she is always at her happiest with a pencil and sketch pad in her hands, dreaming up new designs. She won't confirm if she has ever worked for Simon Le Bon. "But I do believe that everyone deserves to have a lovely garden," says the eternal New Romantic. □

USEFUL INFORMATION

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