

## ***Maximise your design experience***

Garden designer Barry Lupton MGLDA, explains how you can get the most from employing the services of a qualified garden designer.

Having your garden designed is a relatively straightforward process that can bring you years of enjoyment. With a little preparation, some forward planning and a modest amount of input, it can be an immensely rewarding, engaging and educational experience.



Over the last decade I've had the good fortune to work on a vast array of design projects and in doing so have gained an enormous amount of experience and valuable insight. To help you maximise your design experience I've put together a general guide with some practical tips and advice that should help you get the most from employing the services of a garden designer.

### **Preparation**

Although designers are trained to recognise, utilise and interpret your needs, you'll find that the more information you provide the more value you will gain from the process. So once you've made the decision to have your garden designed, the first thing you should consider undertaking is a little preparation. Design preparation can begin with a few simple exercises such as listing your likes and dislikes; don't be constrained to just listing gardens elements, include music, art, places, people, and anything else that comes to mind. You might also consider assembling the garden stakeholders - family, partners and so - for a general discussion about the possibilities and opportunities. You can structure such discussions by looking at short, medium and long term needs separately and by asking each participant to write down their own needs prior to starting.

Having begun the process of developing your design brief you might find it beneficial to flip through garden orientated magazines and books. Cut out or photocopy pictures that capture your desires and make a scrapbook. And don't worry about spending a fortune buying books, check out your local library, 20 minutes leafing through the garden section might be the best investment you make.

If you're feeling really enthused about your garden's potential and if the idea of lists and scrapbooks doesn't appeal, then try to get out to your local garden centre, or even better; the National Garden Exhibition Centre; the Japanese Garden's in Kilquade; the National Botanic Gardens in Glasnevin or a garden festival like Bloom in the Phoenix Park. Nothing beats seeing design ideas in the flesh for helping you to define what you'd like to achieve.

## **Choosing a designer**

Once you have a reasonably solid set of objectives that you'd like to achieve the next step is to select the right designer for you. By far the best way to secure a quality design service is through recommendation. Ask friends, family and work colleagues if they know of someone that they be happy to recommend; I bet you find someone suitable. If someone is recommended be sure to double check yourself, inspect their work, ask for further references and evidence of a relevant qualification.

If you cannot source a suitable designer via the grape vine ,then your next destination should be should be an industry association. For Ireland, you're looking for the Garden and Landscape Design Association (GLDA). The GLDA is an independently assessed industry body established to uphold design standards across Ireland. Full membership is only achieved after the successful completion of a rigorous assessment process. Through their easy to navigate website ([www.glda.ie](http://www.glda.ie)) you can view profiles of Ireland's accredited designers and link directly to their websites.

*'Take your time; don't rush or be rushed. You'll save money and maximise your garden investment with a little patience and a long term view'*

## **Use the Web**

While the traditional routes to securing services - phonebook and directories - have served us well in the past, I would personally not advise you to choose a designer based on their brightly-coloured, full page ad in the local directory. With the Internet at your fingertips you're able to become well informed about potential designers before you decide to pick up the phone. Most designers of repute have a web presence that communicates the level of services they offer.

Whatever route you take to securing the services of a designer, make sure you do your homework. There are a large number of unscrupulous individuals out there who are more than happy to exploit the ill-informed. If you're unsure, ask. If you don't like the answers your getting, go elsewhere.

*'Establishing a good relationship with your designer is essential to achieving a great garden. The more they know you the better able they'll be to deliver a garden that meets all your needs'*

## **Making a call**

It might seem obvious but it's worth listing the various questions you have for potential designers - what do you charge, how long does a design take, will you build it and so? By listing them you have a reference point for phone calls. As mentioned above, if you don't like the answers you can always look elsewhere.

When satisfied that you're happy that a particular designer can deliver for you, it's time to set up a site visit. When setting a time and date try to ensure that you've allowed plenty of time, that relevant stakeholders are available and that it's during daylight hours. During the first site visit, and depending on your needs and the complexity of the site, you can expect a designer to; establish your exact requirements, clarify services, fees and projected timescale, and undertake a survey of the site (record measurements, take photos and so on).

### **Design development and presentation**

After the first visit and once a procedure has been established, you should expect your designer to contact you within a specified time frame. I personally ask clients to take a couple of days to digest what was discussed during the first site visit before contacting them again to finalise the brief and set a date for when the design will be completed.

*'Design is always in flux and designs can and usually do evolve as they move from paper to ground. Don't fear change, embrace it.'*

When your design is ready you should expect your designer to formally present it to you; taking time to lead you through the scheme, emphasising how they have addressed your specific requirements. Some designers - but not all - will provide you with additional visual support material such as sketches, 3d drawings and mood boards. If at any stage something is not completely clear, ask. Once a design has been presented, I personally request that client do nothing for at least two weeks. Well I say nothing; I mean I ask them to get as much input as possible. Get friends around, bring your design to work, have a design party, have as many people as possible input into the design as you can. You'll save money, time and heartache working out design issues on paper. Once a design translates into earth, stone and plants, it gets a lot more expensive.

### **Post-design options**

When a design has been finalised, your designer will usually offer a variety of options, including; securing a suitable contractor, managing the build, putting the design out to tender (getting various prices) and offering further advice to assist the self builder. In the vast majority of cases clients tend to opt for a recommended contractor and in my experience this is the best route: no designer with any sense is going to recommend a contractor who doesn't offer value for money and quality service. The above noted, I always put it to clients that they should get a number of quotes; with the shift in economic fortune this has become more standard practise.

*'If your budget is restricted, take a longer-term approach to design implementation. It's better to spend five years realising something that will provide 30 years of pleasure, than two months building something that might cause 30 years of regret.'*

## **The build**

Many people assume that the completion of the design drawings signifies the end of their input; nothing could be further from the truth. It is essential - especially where you have not employed your designer to manage the construction - that you input as much as you can.

*'Never, never, never allow a contractor to start work on your garden unless you're 100% clear about what is being done. A professionally prepared plan will ensure that everyone is literally working from the same page.'*

Generally speaking there are three primary stages of client input during a build. Firstly, when a garden has been prepared/cleared, you should ensure that the contractor marks out the design on the ground and allows you sufficient time to understand how the garden will be formed. Like solving problems on paper, making changes with marks on the ground is practically free. Secondly, you need to inspect the finishing of hard features such as paving and structures, take time to understand how things are built and detailed. If they don't match your expectations then ask for them to be changed. Thirdly, you endeavour to input on the garden planting. If there is one element that is sure to evolve as a garden is constructed, it's planting. The choosing, arrangement and planting of trees and shrubs is an art in itself; get it right and it's magic, get it wrong and it's tragic. During this stage I personally like to revisit a site to re-examine original planting proposals and often invite clients to visit nurseries to see first hand the palette of plants I've selected. In addition to ensuring the design is cohesive, having an input during planting allows for greater ownership, engagement and understanding of the garden scheme.

On completion, most designers will take time to walk you through the garden, explaining how it works, how it will evolve and how you might maximise it through use and interaction.

Don't be afraid to call your designer a year or two down the line to let them know how the garden is performing. Like all service sectors, design is reliant upon feedback - both good and bad - to improve.

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