

“THERE’S ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF ME THAT HAS LOVED NURTURING, MENTORING AND HELPING PEOPLE”



Avid plantswoman **Nina Baxter** is one year into her role as a director of the London College of Garden Design

WORDS: NINA MASON

Teaching has long been a passion for Nina Baxter. So, it seems only fitting that the Beckenham-based designer is the newest director of the London College of Garden Design, as of August last year.

Her first stint, though, was teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) fresh out of university. The pipedream was to become an actress, so she'd studied for a postgraduate degree in Theatre Arts before moving to Florence, Italy. There, she spent two years working for a theatre thanks to Erasmus, a programme which supports those in the European Union to study or train abroad.

When she returned to the UK, Baxter took a TEFL course and started teaching in London whilst looking for a full-time position. She found one at the world-renowned Globe Theatre in Southwark in PR and communications, “a step along from acting”, and worked as press officer to BAFTA Award-winning actor Sir Mark Rylance.

It was at the Globe that she met her husband, Matthew – something which would unwittingly spark a career change. Baxter had loved horticulture since she was a child. Her mum was a botanist, and her grandmother an avid gardener, so she'd been passionate about plants from a young age. She fell out of love throughout her teenage years “as you do”. But getting to know her mother-in-law, ▶



a garden designer based near Peterborough, Baxter rediscovered her horticultural roots. “She reinvigorated my love of plants.” Baxter had moved onto working in communications for the Millennium Commission by this point and had just bought her first house with her own small garden. When she was inevitably made redundant once the commission had fulfilled its purpose, Baxter decided to retrain, completing an RHS General Certificate in horticulture before booking herself onto a year-long course at the English Gardening School to study the plants and plantsmanship diploma in 2001.

“Being at the Chelsea Physic Garden, where the school is based, was amazing and



I absolutely loved it. I went on to do a diploma in garden design because I quickly realised that I loved designing with plants and, by extension, I loved designing the spaces for plants. When I design a garden, it’s all green to start with and I carve out spaces for hardscaping, rather than the other way around.”

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Her love of plants initially made her consider owning her own nursery, but this was far from straightforward in the UK. “I’d join my mother-in-law on plant buying trips to Holland and be amazed by how set up for it they were there. The Dutch growers are supported by government, not just through subsidies but through there only being 6% VAT on plants. It’s a really important industry over there. When we left the European Union,



there should have been more support to grow the industry here. We still import the majority of our plants and it’s far more difficult now and much more expensive. I think

we’ve missed an opportunity.”

Instead, together with her husband – who had also left the Globe Theatre – Baxter set up a garden design and maintenance business in 2004, aiming for a quality service. “We wanted to show people that you need somebody to look after your garden who understands plants and how to care for them properly – not just ‘mow, blow and go’, as they say.”

There’s a “massive skills shortage” in aftercare and a “misunderstanding of the skills required” to carry it out. This is changing through horticultural consultants such as Gill Chamberlain and designers such as Harry Holding launching his new aftercare service earlier this year, though, the idea being that trained professionals are carrying out aftercare in people’s gardens, she says.

“There’s a growing awareness and a growing need for that. The more people who have their gardens professionally designed, the more who want to have their gardens looked after properly. But we have a long way to go in terms of communicating the value and the difficulty of what we do.”

Covering southeast London, Baxter’s practice was one of few offering garden design locally, and there was a “lack of understanding” as to what it was and that it should be paid for. But she started to grow her client base through recommendations. “We were in a really good catchment area and started to build up a clientele quite quickly. We only ever needed to market the business for the first couple of years. Otherwise, it’s been word of mouth or from the website or the van, because it’s such a close-knit community.”

She also wanted to help train local young people, so hired them and helped them to gain City & Guilds certificates for them to either continue working with her or set up on their own. But this was incredibly difficult, she admits. “I’m not going to lie; it was really hard. Although we managed to enthuse them about planting



and gardens, some of them had really troubled pasts and were struggling to get out of the lives they’d been living. At the same time, the garden design side of our business was taking off, so we were taking on more and more design work. Looking after the maintenance side was becoming too difficult.”



The business was going from “strength to strength”, with Baxter and her husband managing the design, the builds – bringing in specialist subcontractors when needed – and the maintenance arm. “It was really full on trying to do everything.”

So, they sold the maintenance company to someone who had worked with them from the beginning and who continues to run it, employing other people locally. “That

makes me so happy that there were a few people who we managed to help.

“There’s always been a part of me that has loved nurturing, mentoring and helping people – explaining things and sharing knowledge, that has always been one of my strengths. If there is one thing that runs through everything that I do, it’s communication; from the outset, that has been the thread. With clients, I love the rapport that you build, taking the brief, understanding exactly what they want and being able to express what I’m designing to excite people about their gardens.”

Now, Baxter focuses solely on design, having dropped the build side as it became “more and more onerous”. They now work with nearby landscapers to build the majority of their projects; though Baxter will always take on the planting. “I rarely outsource that to a contractor. I always set out the plants myself and have a lovely team of very well-qualified gardeners who plant them with me.”

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the evolving business. Throughout that time, Baxter has also been involved in the planting for numerous award-winning show gardens. Her first was for Andy Sturgeon in

2007, and she’s since worked with names such as Chris Beardshaw, Paul Hervey-Brookes and Jo Thompson. “I became known as a sort of go-to person on the showground as someone who could organise a planting team and do planting. There are others too – Humaira Ikram, Alexa Ryan Mills and Jane Porter; there aren’t that many, though, and

I was possibly one of the first to get that as an ongoing role.”

More professional planting designers and planters are being paid for their work on show gardens too, says Baxter. “I’m all for people volunteering when they’re students or graduates or new to the industry. But professionals need to be paid, just as the

contractors do. It was always a budget issue previously, but I think that’s now changing.”

She quickly progressed to becoming an RHS judge and joining selection panels. ▶

“We have a long way to go in terms of communicating the value and the difficulty of what we do.”

- 1 Family garden in Beckenham
- 2 Traditional front garden, Bromley
- 3 Modern, terraced garden in Chislehurst
- 4 Seating area by yew and myrtle hedging
- 5 A family garden in Bickley
- 6 Arts and craft water garden in Chislehurst
- 7 Jo Thompson’s RHS Chelsea garden planting

“It coincided with the RHS wanting people who were in the planting arena. In the last 10 years, planting design has become a profession in its own right, whereas before it was just part of garden design and landscape architecture.”

As chair of the judging panel, Baxter feels feedback for designers and contractors is essential for helping them on their journey for the next time they create a show garden. “I take it really seriously because it’s incredibly important that we get the judging right and give it our absolute attention.”

Baxter had toyed with the idea of designing her own show garden, but there were a couple of barriers. “Once you’re established, you’re putting yourself up there in front of your peers to be judged, which is terrifying. But also, unless you get into designing show gardens when you’re fresh out of college, it’s really hard to do when you’re established. You have to start thinking about it at least a year in advance and it takes up so much time when you already have a pipeline of clients. So, to break into it when you’re established or set up is harder.”

Through her work with the RHS, though, Baxter “re-met” Andrew Fisher Tomlin and Andrew Wilson, who had taught her at the English Gardening School. By this point, they had set up their own school, the London College of Garden Design. She offered to put together a course for garden designers on communicating with your clients and contractors and, when the LCGD set up its planting design diploma, Baxter carried out studio days for them.

She’d been teaching for the college for around 10 years before joining both Andrews

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as a director on 1 August last year. Fisher Tomlin was looking for a new course leader for the planting design diploma, as he balances this alongside managing the London College of Melbourne where he teaches for six weeks of the year. Baxter happily took on the role and eventually became a director.

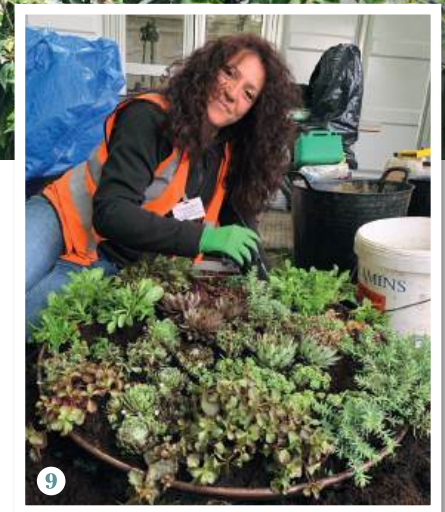
You could argue it’s the pinnacle of what has been a career of knowledge sharing and mentoring. “I think this is my best skill. I can design and I can do planting design pretty well. And I’m always pleased with my designs – clients are happy, and they send me photos, which is fantastic.

But what I love most is passing on knowledge. Everybody has their own skillset, and this is mine.”

Her skillset gels well with the other directors too. “We make a really good team.” And whilst Baxter says other design schools all have their merits, the London College of Garden Design is “the best”. So, when the

opportunity arose, Baxter felt like it was “the perfect time and the perfect fit”.

“We’d just come through covid, which was a really difficult time. Apart from the obvious reasons, it was a boon time for us; it went mad in terms of work. Everybody wanted to spend money on their gardens. But at the same time, more clients were more demanding and antagonistic. So, I started to feel tired after that period from trying to



service as many clients as I could and give them what they wanted when everyone was being really demanding because they were frustrated with what was going on. It was a good time to assess what I wanted to do next.”

She didn’t want to stop designing for clients because “it’s essential to stay current if you’re teaching a professional course” and felt that the LCGD would bring together all her passions – teaching, communications and plants. “I get to sit in a room with 24 other people who are really into plants – it’s the best. And you end up learning from students just as they learn from you, because many are professionals in the industry. They’re a garden designer or a landscape architect or a horticulturist, and they all come from different walks of life. I’d say around 90% are career changers, like I was, so there’s an enormous amount of knowledge being shared in the room, and I really enjoy that.”

That’s where Baxter thrives – in sharing knowledge. The fact that it gets to be on her favourite topic of plants is an added bonus, and it’s a passion she seems genuinely thrilled to pass on to her students next term.

8 London courtyard garden

9 Succulents for RHS Chelsea Flower Show

10 A cottage garden in Chislehurst