

# PLANTERIA

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THE INDEPENDENT GUIDE TO PLANTSCAPE PRODUCTS AND MATERIAL

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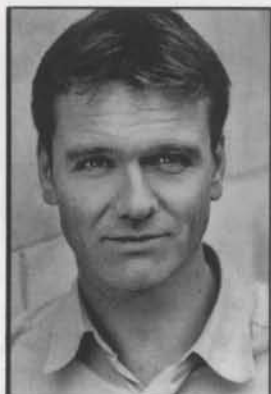
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In the early eighties Andy Sturgeon was dreaming of contemporary gardens with clean, classic lines, constructed with traditional materials. Now, twenty years on the rest of the world has caught up.



## Ahead of his time

The fact that Andy Sturgeon is one of just two designers chosen to kick off the Witan Street Gardens initiative at R.H.S. Wisley couldn't be more appropriate. Having taken Chelsea gold this summer for his critically acclaimed Merrill Lynch show garden, (his first Chelsea medal was a silver gilt for the Circ Contemporary Man's Garden in 2001) his ability as a designer is in no doubt, but the brief, to demonstrate the possibilities of the typically small plot facing new home owners, could have been tailor made.

Sturgeon left school in the early 1980s to work in his elder brother's landscaping business looking for an outside occupation that would allow his creativity to flourish. After three years studying tropical plants and interior landscaping at the Welsh College of Horticulture and gaining practical experience in the RHS Wisley gardens he set up his own garden design and maintenance business, only to disappear around the world five years later. "I took a sabbatical which lasted almost three years," he recalls. "It was something I'd always wanted to do but I was too much in debt. Now, after college I was more in debt than ever, but I had to do it. I suppose it was partly disillusionment, especially with garden design. All anybody wanted was Yorkshire stone and brick paving."

In other words the world of gardening and garden design was stuck in a rut with no outlet for the modern, clean, classic shapes that Sturgeon had in mind. "I travelled across Africa, crewed for a number of yachts sailing around the Indian Ocean, and finished up in Hong Kong working on the world's largest road and suspension bridge," he continues. "By the time I came home everything had changed."

Groundforce had arrived on television, followed by numerous spin-offs, and gardening had become trendy, accessible and above all open to new ideas. Sturgeon took advantage of the change in climate and wrote his first book 'Planted' which was aimed at a younger generation of first-time gardeners and published in October 1998 by Hodder and Stoughton. His second book "Potted", which revitalised the image of indoor plants, followed, while his show gardens for Hampton Court and Chelsea (notably his Circ Contemporary Man's Garden in 2001) allowed him to pursue his passion for contemporary design using traditional materials.

By this time Sturgeon was writing for lifestyle and gardening magazines, with a regular column, still running, in the Daily Mail's 'Weekend' section. The writing led to television including 'Planted' and 'The Answer Lies In The Soil' for ITV, "Gardening Neighbours" for BBC 2, 'Housecall' for BBC1 and daytime coverage for last year's Chelsea Flower Show. This year's Chelsea saw him too busy with the Merrill Lynch garden.

"I wanted to show that you can have a contemporary garden without using glass and stainless steel," he says. "When we were building the Merrill Lynch Garden and the oak stepping stones were in place but without the surrounding planting people were fascinated by them. They kept wanting



*Pictured above and below: Witan Street Garden, Wisley showing his oak decking and seat, black basil lined pool, bubble fountain and four fastigate horbeams*





to touch them, and you don't get that with stainless steel!"

The stepping-stones and accompanying poolside planting provided the only random element in a design created with straight lines and constructed with geometric precision. Black tulip Queen of Night planted within Stipa arundinacea grasses, purple iris "Superstition" towering above ground cover Euphorbia and shrubs Cotton lavender, Rosemary and Pittosporum on two sides of the perfectly square lawn all had their part to play, while strategically placed silver birches gave height and balance. Uncompromisingly modern, the garden sat serenely in its surroundings, somehow managing to inspire and soothe at the same time.



Witan Street, a competition mounted jointly by the RHS and the Society of Garden Designers, and sponsored by Witan Investment Trust plc, will, by the end of 2008 have selected eight designers, each given a 60 sq metre plot to interpret their own take on a small, contemporary garden suitable for professional couples moving into their first home. At the moment two designers have been selected, Sturgeon being one of them, and these two gardens are currently on show to Wisley visitors. Next year there will be two more, the year after another two, until by June 2008 the street of eight gardens will be complete.

Although his Witan Street plot is approx. a quarter of the size of his Chelsea space, Sturgeon has incorporated all the elements

expected in a modern outside room - patio, pool, water feature, seating, shade, plants, trees and shrubs, in a coherent, uncluttered whole that looks anything but cramped. His oak decking walkway from the imagined back door is wide enough to carry extra seating to the sunny blue limestone patio, the black basalt lined pool looks inviting rather than gloomy, bordered on two sides by more blue limestone, the bubble fountain is just the right size to add interest and sound without dominating, and the four fastigate hornbeams are perfectly balanced by the River birch. The borders hold a mixture of grasses, perennials and ferns in a soft colour palette ranging from the almost orange Achillea "Terracotta" through Aquilegia Yellow Queen, blue Salvia x sylvestris and purple, pink and white Acanthus. The white flowered evergreen shrub Pittosporum tobira nestles in corners created by perimeter fencing.

As one of the first two gardens on display, Sturgeon's Witan Street design will still be at Wisley in three years time. By then his beloved oak, a generous slab of which forms a wide bench, (as well as creating the decking walkway) will have weathered, his perennials will have grown into their allocated space, deliberately left within the borders,

and I doubt for one moment that the design will have dated. Without a curve to be seen, Sturgeon's rectangles overlap and flow as naturally as a stream running down a hillside. The planting serves to enhance the hard landscaping rather than soften it, for his insistence on natural materials ensures that they don't dominate or threaten. Pleased that the public wanted to touch his stepping-stones at Chelsea, the designer might like to know that at Wisley, my mother, now in her eighty-first year wanted to put a chair under his hornbeams and sit beside his fountain. It seems that despite courting the young first time gardeners, his designs appeal to all ages.

*Above:*

*3 pictures of the Merrill Lynch Garden, which took Gold at this summers Chelsea*

*Below left:*

*RHS Garden Wisley where Andy gained practical experience before setting up his own garden design and maintenance business*

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**The RHS Garden Wisley  
is open from 10am to  
6pm Monday to Friday,  
and 9am to 6pm  
Saturday and Sunday  
from March to the end  
of October.**

**For the rest of the year  
the opening times  
remain the same, but  
the gardens close at  
4pm.**

**Last entry is one hour  
before closing time.**