

# What I've LEARNT



**He'll never grow there!**  
Andy Sturgeon in (or rather out of) his Brighton office

## Andy Sturgeon *on the life and times of a garden designer*

Andy Sturgeon, 47, is a leading landscape and garden designer. Having grown up in Surrey, he went to horticulture college before setting up a garden maintenance company while he struggled to find work as a designer. He then opted to go travelling for several years in Africa and Southeast

Asia, before returning to the UK as the country's gardening boom was beginning. From his base in Brighton he now works for both private and commercial clients around the world and is known for his bold schemes using natural materials. He is also a familiar figure on TV.

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I fell into gardening, it was never a plan. I was actually going to join the Army, but I changed my mind. I left school at 18 with some miserable A levels – a D, an O and an F – and had nothing to do. My brother was a landscape contractor and I started working for him. I'd just left school, it was summer, the weather was nice and I thought it was great. I wanted to know more about it, so I decided to study garden design.

There weren't the millions of garden design colleges then that there are now, so I actually studied tropical plants at the Welsh College of Horticulture, because the course had a design element. My tutor was a landscape architect and he shoehorned some of that into it, so every now and again we'd design a roof garden or a courtyard or something, it was a bit random.

Back in those days if you met someone at a party and told them you were a garden designer, they'd look at you as if they'd stepped in something. None of my contemporaries were interested in gardening, the media hadn't picked it up at all, it was just desperately unfashionable. In some ways it was quite a lonely existence, because I was trying to make a career in something the general public, my potential clientele, didn't know existed. It was crazy.

I graduated from college at the end of the 1980s. It was the beginning of the last recession, so the worst possible time to set up a business. I was doing garden design in the evening, because there was no way I could make a living doing it at that time, and I was doing garden maintenance by day. The maintenance thing grew, but although it gave me quite a healthy income, I didn't like it. I was essentially just cleaning people's gardens. I remember telling my parents I was going to jack it in and go travelling. My dad did my books, so he knew that I had a good business and he couldn't understand why I wanted to walk away from it. Whereas my mum just said, well if you're not happy, then yes, of course, off you go. But leaving it behind ultimately opened doors and possibilities for me.

I bought a return ticket to Nairobi because I had a friend who lived there and I got on a plane. I kind of made it up as I went along. I climbed Kilimanjaro, went to Zanzibar, went on safari, learned to dive, really had fun. I was travelling on my own, which was good because I learnt quite a lot about making decisions without having to consult other people, and that was something I very much brought back from that trip.

After Africa I went off to Southeast Asia and ended up working on a suspension bridge in Hong Kong. I lied a bit in the interview and told them I was a builder! The strange thing is

that we now have work in Hong Kong and the clients really like the fact that I lived there. What's happened is that so much of what I ended up doing when I was travelling and thought nothing of at the time has actually proved to be useful, whether it's something I saw or something I learnt. And I've also managed to turn my work now into a way of travelling.

I came back to the UK in May 97 on the day that Tony Blair was elected. Gardening had changed. There were gardening programmes on TV, there were new magazines coming out, it was quite an exciting time. I actually thought I'd missed the boat but I was lucky that I managed to jump on it. I got a very lucky break to write my first book, *Planted*, which was for young, first-time gardeners. I'd never written anything before, so the publishers took a big chance on me. In my 20s I'd had a lot of

opportunities that I hadn't really noticed or jumped on and when I came back from travelling, having had a day-to-day existence of being alert to what was going on around me, I was somehow more in tune with possibilities when they came along. If I saw an opportunity coming, I would take it. It was like that with the book and everything that then followed. I would work really, really hard to make these things happen.

People ask whether garden design is art, but I think that's trying to put it in a box with something else. It should be given the respect of being its own thing. In many ways it's far more complex than art because we have to deal with the seasons and plants growing and dying and the way the sun moves round, there's so much to consider. I think it should be respected for being as complex as it is.

My wife, Sarah, died suddenly in 2009. I have three kids, who are eight, ten and 13, so it's a real juggling act to try and get that work/life balance. I travel a lot but I'll always try not to be away at the weekend or during the school holidays. I think I've become more hedonistic and more immediate about things. I'm much more philosophical about the potential shortness of life, so I try and cram a lot in and have fun where I can. It means I don't sit down much.

I'm not a fanatical gardener, it's just one of the things I like doing. There's a kind of dichotomy in my life. I'm trying to run a business and make money and do great work, but there's also a bit of a hippy in me as well and gardening is an outlet for that. It's something I'll always want to do. I'd love to have a big garden but the problem is I'm really fussy and I can't keep gardeners. They don't do what I want them to do! ■

**In many ways garden design is far more complex than art**

**details** Interview by Tim Hulse. Photograph by Richard Cannon. More information: [andysturgeon.com](http://andysturgeon.com)

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