

# The Business

WORK, PLAY AND TRAVEL LIKE A BOSS



MY GREATEST MISTAKE

"I SAID NO TO  
THE BEST JOB  
OF MY LIFE"

AWARD-WINNING GARDEN DESIGNER ANDY STURGEON  
COULD HAVE CHANGED HIS FORTUNES AT A MUCH EARLIER  
POINT, SO NOW HE CHECKS OUT EVERY OPPORTUNITY

**T**wice voted one of the top garden designers in Britain and winner of a shed-full of awards, including eight gold medals and three Best in Show at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, Andy Sturgeon is one of Europe's most talented designers. He started his business back in 1998 and today heads up a practice that runs four design teams with a global roster of prestigious clients. Could he have got where he is today any sooner? Possibly. He did pass up on a rather big project along the way...

**I designed my first garden** before I left school in the 80s, but it didn't seem like a sustainable career. I went travelling and when I returned in 1997, there was a lot of interest in gardening in the media and there were even garden-makeover shows on TV. Somehow I got a chance to write a book. The publishers got me a column in a newspaper and then some TV [work] came along. Garden design was on the crest of a wave.

**I rode that crest.** I did Hampton Court Flower Show in '98 and >

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hooked into what felt like a new industry. It was a transformative time. I hired my first person in 2000. He wrote asking if I had any work and, while I didn't have enough for him, I took him on and he compelled me to make something of the business. We would discuss fees together and he'd always get me to double my prices.

**A while ago, we were contacted by someone's PA.** Experience had taught me that if it's a PA who's getting in touch, and not the actual decision-maker, then we're probably not off to a good start. They talked in vague terms about a project they didn't seem to know much about, so I told them I didn't want the job...

**...It turned out to be an amazing job** for a huge country estate. It was the kind of project that we were crying out for back then and it could have transformed our portfolio. I only found out because a friend of mine won the project. It was



**MEDAL EARTH**  
 Andy Sturgeon in the M&G Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2019, for which he won Best in Show and a gold medal

ongoing and very lucrative. Now, I Google everyone and carry out due diligence for every enquiry.

**When I won my first gold medal,** I was also on course for Best in Show. I'd planned for an amazing sculptural fence to be part of the garden, but the guy who made it claimed it got smashed in an accident on the motorway, so we had to get a fence panel from a garden centre. It did look amazing, but because I'd put the sculptural fence in my entry description, I couldn't win the show prize.

**In the early days, I was focused on design, not business.** We took on jobs because I wanted to do them, rather than because I could make money from them. It got so bad that my partner said perhaps it was time to find a new career.

**My attitude changed** and I decided to take on more commercial work

to bring in the money. It can still be interesting and rewarding.

**That said, we have one private client who has probably spent £12m or £13m over seven years on his garden.** He constantly wants to make it look better, and invests in interesting plants and really skilled craftsmen. He wants the best and has the passion.

**I could spend all week quoting and not getting any work done.** The way I deal with it is to charge a small consultation fee. It doesn't cover my time at all, but it's a minor commitment and means that people don't get me in on a whim.

**Today, I enjoy the business side.** We employ 22 people and run four teams. I still design – that will always be my passion – but there's a lot of managing and nurturing of talent. We go on foreign trips together and do the whole team-building thing.

**ANDY STURGEON'S CV**

**AGE** 54

**POSITION** Owner, Andy Sturgeon Design

**BORN** Esher, Surrey, UK

**LIVES** Brighton, UK

**EDUCATION** Dip (Landscape), FSGD, Welsh College of Horticulture, North Wales, UK

**MOTTO** "Aim for the best, expect the worst and accept what you get"