



Ann-Marie Powell

The colourful garden designer on her Damascene conversion to gardening, her trepidation over TV presenting and why she wants to encourage visitors to picnic in her show gardens

WORDS JODIE JONES PORTRAIT CHARLIE HOPKINSON

It was on a hillside full of lupins that Ann-Marie Powell found her destiny. "I was in New Zealand, on the last leg of a gap year, and that ocean of colour just stopped me in my tracks.

I was overcome by a vision of Mother Nature flying free with her skirts in the air, and I knew I wanted to create gardens."

This revelation came as something of a bolt from the blue.

Ann-Marie was an outdoorsy sort of girl, but gardening certainly hadn't featured in her life plans up until that point. Her father was in the army, so Ann-Marie and her little sister moved every couple of years and attended boarding school, which was good for building social skills but not horticultural ones.

From there she went to Trent Polytechnic to study textile design, but had more fun on the party circuit than the course, and left early to travel and rethink her future. "I had always loved being outdoors, but it took a while for me to connect that with my creative side. When I got to New Zealand, a switch just flipped in me and I fell suddenly, wallopingly, in love with Nature."

At the end of the trip she signed up for the garden design course at Capel Manor College. "It was great," she says. "We had 20 acres of grounds with proper demonstration gardens and, unlike a lot of courses, Capel Manor taught hard landscaping, which I absolutely loved. I don't know if I still can, but back in the day I could lay a very serviceable patio all by myself."

She graduated with Distinction, and then went to Tendercare Nurseries, to consolidate her plant knowledge. "The co-owner, Angela Halksworth (a very glamorous and forthcoming woman), let me stage plant combinations near the office, just picking a bunch of pots I thought looked good together, and customers would come up and buy the whole lot."

She was surrounded by plants all day, and in the evenings tuned in to a new television programme called *Garden Doctors* (presented by a lovely young man call Dan Pearson), which was taking Channel 4 by storm. "I loved everything about that programme. It showed how, as a gardener, you can enhance people's lives."

And then a fax arrived in the office, scouting for new presenters for *Garden Doctors*. "I flatly refused to apply, but Angela put me in for it without saying anything. I got one heck of a shock when the production company called me in for a try out."

Despite huge misgivings about the whole venture, on the morning of the audition she knew she didn't want to dress "like a gardener", so she borrowed an Armani suit from her boyfriend's mother, and stopped off at a pub near Spitalfields for a spot of Dutch

courage. "It was the strangest thing. I really didn't want to go for it, then all of a sudden I knew I desperately wanted the job."

Needless to say, the producers snapped her up, and she was thrown in at the deep end. "It was real hard graft all day long, then in the evenings I would go home and research endlessly. It was a baptism of fire, but an amazing chance to learn on the job and build my portfolio."

By chance, Ann-Marie had hit the sweet spot for television gardening, and she went from *Garden Doctors* to *Real Gardens* with Carol Klein and Monty Don, then *Lost Gardens* (also with Monty), and *Take Three Gardeners*, with Joe Swift and Cleve West. "We were all totally on the same wavelength, determined to make properly good gardens for people, not take short cuts for the telly."

It was fun, but also extremely hard work. Ann-Marie once filmed for 53 consecutive days, so when she found she was expecting her first child, it was the ideal excuse to step away from the small screen and go back to her drawing board.

"When I set up the design practice, my first client had such a massive garden I couldn't fit the plan on a single sheet of paper. I was petrified, but also unbelievably excited. I must have done a reasonable job because 15 years later I'm still working for the same client."

These days a raft of private and corporate clients are attracted by her unique combination of technically impeccable hard landscaping and wildly colourful and inventive planting. The private clients often ask her to sign a privacy agreement but, fortunately for the rest of us, she has also designed a number of high-profile show gardens and has a shelf full of medals to prove it. Most recently, she created the Greening Grey Britain garden for the RHS at last year's Chelsea Flower Show. It was vintage Powell, full of crazy colour, cleverly steal-able design ideas and – most unusually for a Chelsea show garden – people. "I absolutely insisted that visitors should be able to walk through it. I wanted them to be able to have a close look, to sit down and eat their lunch.

"I really believe, as the landscape architect Thomas Church said, that gardens are for people and as a designer I can open their eyes to a wonderful pleasure that will stay with them for the rest of their lives." □

USEFUL INFORMATION

Ann-Marie Powell Gardens, Lower Cowgrove, Heath Farm, Heath Road East Petersfield, Hampshire GU31 4HT.
Tel 01730 825650, ann-marielowell.com

NEXT MONTH Iris expert Sarah Cook.

"My first client had such a massive garden I couldn't fit the plan on a single sheet of paper. I was petrified, but also unbelievably excited"