

Let's Hear it From **ANN-MARIE POWELL**

Ann-Marie Powell is one of the top women in the landscape industry. From starting out in design and build to her successful design career, Ann-Marie talks about how she got to where she is today. She will appear live on stage at FutureScape on Tuesday 17 November, where she will speak frankly and openly about the industry

How long have you been in the landscape industry, and how and why did you get into it?

I discovered my love for gardening when I had my first house with Peter, an ex-partner who was a building contractor. Because I'd been at boarding school as a child I never really had a base, so when I got my own outdoor space I just started planting things. It was like magic for me. I quite like being slightly out of control and it felt as if I'd try out something in the garden with completely unexpected results – I found it so extraordinary!


My partner and I then went travelling and visited India, New Zealand and Thailand which was when I really fell in love with landscape. Just seeing the way nature did things, it was mesmerising. Whilst I was away I decided that I would come back and train to be a gardener. I'd always had an arty background so many people advised me to do garden design. I researched loads of courses and ended up at Capel Manor studying garden design and hard landscape, so I did construction as well. By the time I'd graduated at the age of 24/25 I started out by designing and building gardens for friends. It was important for me to know the practical side of landscaping as I was then able to point out exactly how I wanted things. I just loved being outdoors, and I still do!

At Capel Manor, how were the design and build elements of the course separated?

It was set out in days, so you would do a day of design and hard landscaping, a day of horticultural practice such as digging and double digging, another on plant ID, and some business studies and machinery training, so it was a really well rounded and practical course.

Was your intention to go it alone as soon as you had your qualifications?

Yes, but I also wanted to support Peter's business, which was house building. When I came out of college I realised that my plant knowledge wasn't up to speed



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so I worked at Tendercare for two years dealing with other garden designers and landscape architects and that was an amazing education.

When would that have been and how did it lead to your TV career?

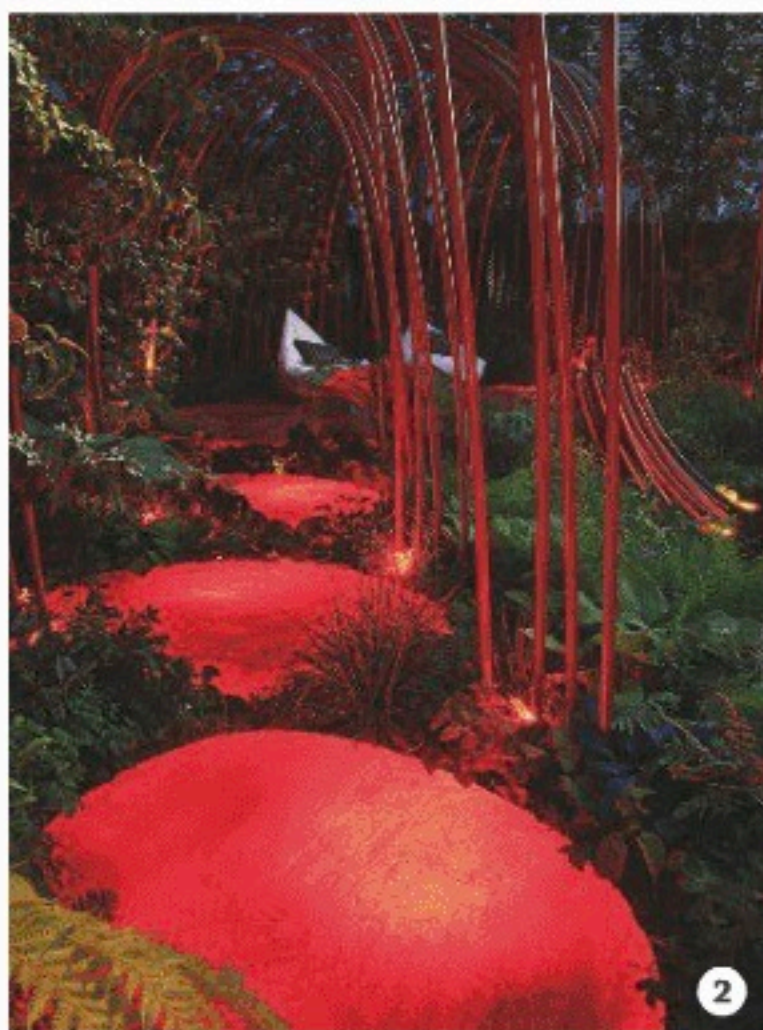
That was around 1997/98 I guess. Angela at Tendercare was brilliant – we got along so well and I still love seeing her. She just let me roll with it. She'd allow me to pull plants out and put schemes together. She was a good mentor, we would knock ideas off each other which helped my knowledge and understanding of plants.

One day a fax came around about a new TV series and that led to me being involved with Garden Doctors, which Dan Pearson and Steve Bradley presented and was the first garden makeover programme on television. I admired Dan, he was a young man himself and I slightly fell in love with him. I thought what he was doing was extraordinary because it was what I wanted to do. Angela applied on my behalf (without telling me) and I met with the TV company, and got the job filming with a guy called Paul Thompson. So all of a sudden I was doing the hard landscaping. I was thrown in at the deep end, building gardens all over the country.

After the success of the series, I got more television offers. One was a series called Real Gardens with Carol Klein and Monty Don – Channel 4's answer to Gardeners' World. I had to learn on my feet – it was such a brilliant education, the best I could've ever had. I had to get it right. I remember going home at night and just researching and learning anything I wasn't 100% sure upon from books because the internet wasn't readily available back then. It was brilliant fun. Since then I've carried on doing all sorts of television series.

Did you know you were suited to TV or did you just learn it?

I never went out there to do television at all and it's never been my mistress. I wanted to be a garden designer but you can't really say no to an opportunity like TV. It took me off around the country experiencing all sorts of gardens, and I was learning a lot and meeting like-minded people who were, importantly, my age – people like Andy Sturgeon, Joe Swift, James Alexander-Sinclair and Cleve West. It was exciting to meet people who thought about things in the same way as myself. This was all years ago, but we're all still very, very firm friends.



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What do you think of the current TV programmes on gardening?

I have to confess I don't really watch them. I think Gardeners' World is great, but I'm not the right audience for it. I think it's really good that programmes like Love Your Garden are trying to bring in younger people.

What about The Great Chelsea Garden Challenge earlier this year...

Yes, I loved that. Even if I wasn't in it I would have thought the programme was brilliant! I thought it was short-sighted of the BBC not to

recommission it. There was so much horticultural content, it gave an insight into the RHS judging procedures and I think the industry enjoyed it. I genuinely feel proud of that programme.

Are you going to do Chelsea next year?

I might be doing something, but if I tell you, I'd have to kill you. →

1 RHS Hampton Court 2015 for Macmillan

2 RHS Chelsea 2011 for the British Heart Foundation

3 Planting for private client, Hampshire