



35 years OF GRADUAL GROWTH

Celebrating its 35th anniversary this year, managing director James Scott explains why slow growth has made The Garden Company a robust business.

WORDS: RACHAEL FORSYTH

Last year, under the twinkling lights at Old Billingsgate, companies across the industry gathered for the Pro Landscaper Business Awards and The Garden Company left on a high. They were taking home their fourth Business Award having just scooped up the Garden Design Company Over £250,000 Turnover Award. Judges praised The Garden Company for

its dedication to training its staff, its positive environmental impact, financial stability and for how it demonstrates leadership within the industry.

Over 35 years, growth, in the words of managing director and principal designer James Scott, might have been “slow” but clearly, it’s also been steady. “We’re quite pedestrian really, because we started ▶

THE GARDEN COMPANY TIMELINE

1986

James Scott’s interest in pursuing a career in the landscaping industry was sparked by meeting a landscape design student and he subsequently enrolled at Merrist Wood College to complete a National Diploma in Landscape Construction.

1987

Scott spent his second college year on a work placement in New England.



1989

Following this achievement – and graduating as Best Design Student – Scott secured a position as a designer at a design and build company in North London.

1989

Scott won a college competition to design a garden at RHS Chelsea Flower Show for the London Association of the Blind. This won a Silver-Gilt medal.

with two people and now we have 20 people,” says Scott. “That’s quite slow growth over that time period, but it’s worked really well. We’ve got a solid business.”

One thing’s for sure. Scott stresses he couldn’t have built this business alone. Not without his wife, Helen, who joined the company in 2015 with a focus on business development; not without the staff who keep the business moving; and not without the relationships he’s built within the industry. They’re all relationships built on trust and respect – but they haven’t come without learning curves.

“In the early days I found it quite difficult to find the right fit when it came to my first employees,” Scott explains. “The first people didn’t work and there was a point where I thought, I’m not sure I can do any of this.” The job wasn’t right for those employees either, Scott explains, and so he takes a more holistic approach to interviews now. “I don’t have a crystal ball to know how someone will work out – you never really know however well they interview,” he says.

“But now I try and find out a bit more about them and what makes them tick, what they like to do, what they don’t like to do – not just can you do this element of the work – and then it’s about instinct. I have a few things I ask myself: am I happy to send this person around to my mum and dad’s house to work? Do I think they’ll get on well with the team? Will they be able to engage with clients? I also like to find out their hobbies outside of work because having those is a good sign.

“I’m very grateful to myself now that I stuck with it because we did overcome those first challenges of employing staff. What I soon realised is you can’t do it without them. Now, we’ve got amazing employees, some of whom have been with us for decades.”

Another learning curve came when Scott found himself unable to be hands-on at every site. “When I started, I was probably visiting site too often – I’d be there every day. What I learned was I needed to allow the people running the gardens to self-direct. You’re there to provide support, but you need to let them get on with the day-to-day running.”

But trust and good team leaders are built. Scott identified members of his team who had good ethos and wanted to do well. Importantly, they also had respect from colleagues. They hadn’t necessarily built big, complex, or high-quality gardens, and at

times they doubted themselves, but Scott trusted his instincts and encouraged and supported them from the sidelines. Now, they are comfortable running projects lasting a year. “It’s satisfying to see their progress and how they take on projects now. And I have an amazing team in the office too. I’m really lucky.

“You have to have people who want to work with you. That means you’ve got to treat them with a lot of respect, trust them with responsibilities and to make decisions on your behalf. I’ve always tried to give people as much responsibility as possible. That’s good for them. It’s definitely good for me. You can’t build a long-term business without people you can trust.”

The importance of this trust and respect extends to relationships with suppliers. Scott is a huge believer in these long-term relationships and has maintained them with suppliers such as London Stone, CED, Hydrologic and Rochford’s almost since the beginning. While it’s important for business owners to make sure they’re paying competitive market rates, Scott argues, “you have to value long-term relationships over short-term discounts. If you talk to a supplier about some sort of detailing, say, and you buy it for slightly less somewhere else, you’re going to blow that trust. Building that trust, it’s really important. You can’t do it on your own if you want to build a business.”



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A shift in Scott’s role within the business

In 2010 The Garden Company was so successful at building gardens for other designers that Scott found he wasn’t doing the design work he loved. Instead, he was managing the business. In fact, he was having to hire in other designers because he spent so much of his time running the company. “The business was successful, but I wasn’t doing the bits of it that I love,” expresses Scott. “I was a bit conflicted. I didn’t want to overbrand as a design business, we still built gardens too, and I was nervous about how other designer clients would feel about it. But I had this seminal moment where I decided I wanted to do more design work and we consciously said, if there is fallout from that, so be it.

“There were some who initially wondered about a conflict of interest, but we’ve actually found that many designers value working with a landscaping company led by a practising garden designer. We’re proud to be trusted by highly-respected designers to build their schemes. Every collaboration also gives us fresh insights into different design solutions, continually broadening our thinking and helping us avoid becoming insular.

“At the same time, our own design work has grown significantly. Today, around 85% of what we build comes from our in-house designs. I’ve loved seeing The Garden Company develop into a genuinely design-led practice. I still enjoy building gardens for other designers, but there’s something especially satisfying about seeing one of our own designs through from the first concept to completion.”

Scott stresses that it’s important to remind yourself sometimes of what you want your business to be. “If you are confident you’re doing the right thing, work really hard at it, be tenacious. There can be risks that you’re working really hard at digging your own hole, so you’ve got to have checks and balances in place.

“It’s about having good business practice, understanding your costs, and for me, it has been sticking at what I know. I know other companies have diversified into doing different things, and I’m certainly not saying there’s anything wrong with that. But for me, it’s been about sticking with the core side of what I believe is a great business, which is designing and building gardens.”



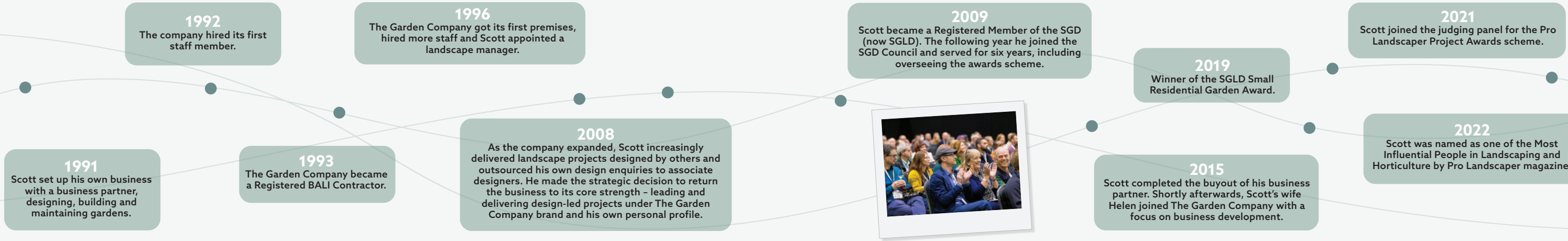
Navigating challenges

Any business that’s celebrating a milestone such as 35 years will have navigated its fair share of rocky waters. The Garden Company is no different. “I’ve been through several recessions and what

I’ve done is manage in a slightly more defensive way,” says Scott. “I’ve always been quite cautious, but when it’s tougher, we batten down the hatches.” For Scott that means protecting the order book by using more in-house staff, rather than hiring in skills.

Scott also advises watching profit and loss much more than cash flow. “You make sure you’re protecting your margins,” he explains, “don’t cut your prices, and make sure you’re working with a client who has a genuine desire to have a quality garden built – then you treat those clients like gold dust.

“We’ve always tried to pitch ourselves at the higher end of the market, working with discerning clients who are signed up to the design process and who are value-driven and not just price-driven. We’re not trying to jump into a much more competitive end of the market; we’ve always avoided that.” ▶



Moving towards retirement

Having spent 35 years running his own business, working through its stresses and strains, Scott feels “incredibly blessed” that he ended up drifting into this industry at a young age. There will always be barriers when running a company, and Scott's next one is his retirement. It's not yet on the horizon for him, but he's wisely looking ahead early at who could be poised to take over his role in its entirety. “As Helen reminds me, I can't do this forever,” Scott says, “At some point she'd like me to do a little bit less work and then eventually retire.” Freeing up more time for their rock band, cooking, more travel and, of course, more involvement in the industry – because does anyone really retire from landscaping?

Scott also has his staff to think about. “I've got people who have worked in the business for a long time so one of my drivers is to make sure the business is secure for them,” Scott explains. “I've got two incredible daughters – neither of who is planning to come into the business, so I'm looking at options. I'm 58 now so I've still got a chunk of time on my side. Maybe there is someone reading this who has ideas on how they would help take the business forward so I can slowly hand over.”

Ultimately, making sure The Garden Company



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is secure for the future means concentrating on what Scott set out to do 35 years ago – to build high-quality gardens for discerning clients with a structure where people who work in the business get satisfaction from that work. With this strategy, over those 35 years The Garden Company has seen staff come into the business and flourish. It's taken home multiple BALI Awards, something Scott has always been “in awe of”. It's also won an SGLD Award and Homes and Gardens Design Awards. Scott himself was named one of Pro Landscaper's Most Influential People and is on the SGLD Council, recently becoming its awards head judge. He has also been selected by the National Trust as an approved garden designer for its properties.

Just as importantly, the business has built gardens which genuinely have a positive effect on people's lives. “Winning awards is great, but it can be quite fleeting,” says Scott. “But creating a garden for someone that makes them happy every day – we're genuinely blessed in our industry that we get to do something that can make a really positive impact on people's lives.”

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2022

Winner of the BALI Special Award for Best Design and Build Project, bringing the total of BALI Awards won over the years to 30 plus.



2024

Scott was selected by the National Trust as an approved garden designer for its properties.

2026

Scott became the SGLD's head judge.

2023

Winner of the Homes and Gardens Design Award for Best Small Garden. Scott was also awarded a Fellowship by the SGLD and joined its accreditation panel.

2025

The business won a Pro Landscaper Business Award, for the second year running, for Garden Design Company over £250,000 turnover.