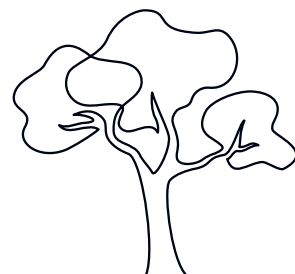
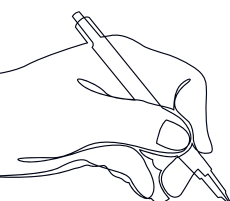


# QUESTIONING QUALIFICATIONS

SHOULD YOU NEED A QUALIFICATION TO CALL YOURSELF A 'GARDEN DESIGNER'?



**W**hat's the difference between a garden designer and a landscape architect? No, that's not the start of a bad joke; it's a common question. After all, a garden designer and a landscape architect can both design domestic and commercial outdoor spaces.

It's qualifications which separate the two – you need to undertake a course in order to call yourself a 'landscape architect'. Garden designers, on the other hand, need no formal qualifications to label themselves as such. But should this change? If so, what should this qualification include? And should top-up credits, such as CPD for landscape architects, be mandatory?

**“THERE ARE MANY GREAT DESIGNERS WHO ARE NOT NECESSARILY QUALIFIED IN GARDEN DESIGN BUT HAVE BUILT ON VARIOUS EXPERIENCE IN GARDEN RELATED AND OTHER SECTORS”**

**HOLLY YOUDE,  
URBAN LANDSCAPE DESIGN**

“Garden design has become extremely complex and having some form of professional qualification is really important to the novice designer,” says Holly Youde of design and build company Urban Landscape Design. “However, there are many great designers who are not necessarily qualified in garden design but have built on various experience in garden related and other sectors.”

The industry could end up losing these great designers if qualifications become compulsory,

says John Brooks of SketchUp for Garden Design, which offers training for design software SketchUp. “Garden designers should of course be encouraged to continually look to educate themselves, particularly on important subjects such as CDM, but we should look to judge designers' work on its merit not necessarily on the letters after their name.”

Being a member of an association, though, is crucial, says James Scott of The Garden Company. “What matters is that anyone calling themselves a garden designer is accredited or actively working towards accreditation. Accreditation with a nationally recognised institution – such as the SGD, the LI or BALI – demonstrates that an individual meets a particular professional standard.

“These standards will include quality working practices and proven skills which members of that professional community have committed to and can demonstrate. Designing a garden is complex, and it requires in-depth knowledge, skills and experience. For me, accreditation is the best way to ensure this.”

The Society of Garden Designers' (SGD) “professional route to becoming an established and recognised designer requires a qualification”, says garden designer Darryl Moore, who reports to the SGD council on education. “A qualification is important as it ensures that the designer has learnt about the many areas of practice that garden design entails, including spatial design and planting, construction, specification, tendering and project management.

“A qualification gives a client assurance that

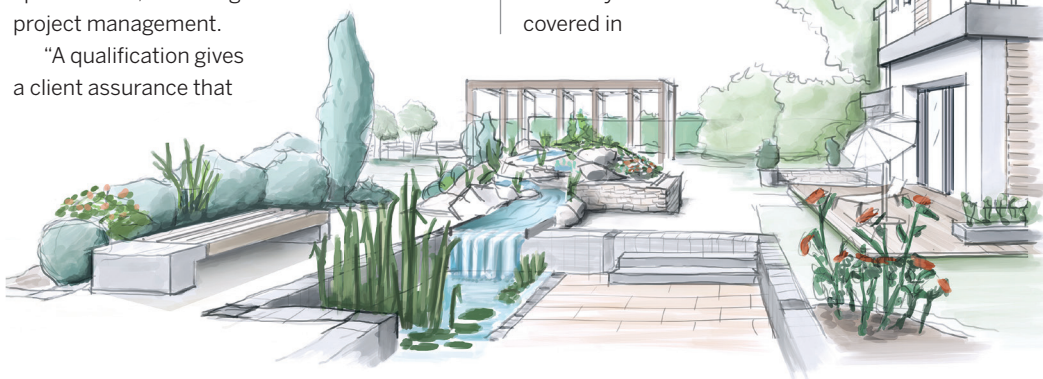
a designer has learnt the necessary skills for the job, while full SGD membership is a mark that the designer works to the highest industry standards.

**“DESIGNING A GARDEN IS COMPLEX, AND IT REQUIRES IN-DEPTH KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE. FOR ME, ACCREDITATION IS THE BEST WAY TO ENSURE THIS”**

**JAMES SCOTT,  
THE GARDEN COMPANY**

“Students can join the SGD as student members then, when qualified, transfer to pre-registered membership. During this period, they submit three real-life completed projects for adjudication, to ensure that they are fully competent and meeting professional standards. Adjudication clinics provide support and advice during this process, looking at client briefs, contract documentation, site analysis and surveys, plans, schedules, construction details, specifications and project management.”

Construction is not always covered in



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as much detail as it could be in courses though, says Holly. "There are many short courses that offer garden design training, but many of these are not sufficient to enable a start to a career in garden design. Many garden design courses focus on soft landscaping, but as complaints are on the rise and legislation is coming into force more on domestic projects, more training in hard landscaping installation, detailing construction, specifying and project management should be provided.

"More is expected of garden designers, now more than ever, and they should be aware of contractual obligations and understand where they are liable if something were to go wrong or be installed incorrectly. Practical, onsite experience should be encouraged as this ensures realistic knowledge of exactly how the plan comes together and the potential pitfalls and adjustments required during the process."

John agrees that not all courses are preparing their students for when they finish college and become practicing garden designers, particularly when it comes to being profitable. "A large proportion of my students come out of design school expecting that they will soon be undertaking six to 10 good commissions a year.

"While this may be true for a lucky few, the vast majority of newly qualified designers seem to be ill-prepared for the reality of getting themselves established and being able to rely on their new careers to pay the bills. From my own experience, I would have appreciated learning about utilising social media, how to develop an online presence, and what contractors really

require from you, far more than perhaps the history of garden design."

'Educator' status is only offered by the SGD to those providers which include start-up business guidance and marketing and client skills in their courses, explains Darryl. They must also provide opportunities for students to gain work experience and encourage students to enter shows and awards. As Darryl puts it, courses must "fulfil the criteria of providing comprehensive teaching and experience in all areas of garden design and are taught by tutors with professional experience". This includes practical landscaping, typically taught by an experienced landscape contractor, and courses must provide a minimum of six site visits and four projects.

The SGD also requires its members to undertake 25 hours of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) each year. "These are logged on members pages on the SGD website and checked," says Darryl. "They cover material and product updates, software training, skills and techniques, conferences and further structured learning. An emphasis on regular updates on best sustainable practice is essential. The SGD also provides a mentoring programme for pre-reg members."

CPD can offer a number of benefits, says James, but it needs to be relevant. "In broad terms, by engaging in CPD, we designers ensure that our theoretical and practical learning do not become outdated or obsolete. However, I don't think we can generalise too much about the content of any CPD activity. For it to be truly effective, the learning needs to be planned and

delivered in a way that meets the needs of the business, the customer and the particular role of the individual designer.

"For example, in my role, staying up to date with product technology is essential so that I can properly advise clients on the best materials for their projects. This is a higher priority than learning about design software updates – but the latter can be hugely important to a member of my design team. Alongside these role-specific requirements, there are also industry trends and changes that affect all designers, such as biodiversity, sustainability and CDM regulations."

Whilst staying up-to-date and expanding their knowledge is beneficial to garden designers, John isn't convinced it matters to most domestic clients. "Being able to clearly communicate your design intentions is vital, as is producing presentation work that is of a professional standard, which is where our courses come in. Would a client be overly

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**DARRYL MOORE,  
GARDEN DESIGNER (REPORTS TO  
SGD COUNCIL ON EDUCATION)**

bothered if the designer held an official document to say they'd spent three days studying with me? I'd suggest probably not. The only things they're really interested in is whether or not they like the designers' work, whether they feel they could work with them as a person, and whether they capable of creating a garden that meets their brief for the budget they have."

The quality of the work, as well as industry accreditations and awards, appear to be more important than qualifications when it comes to being a garden designer. But construction knowledge is seemingly vital, and all garden designers should seek this, regardless of the letters after their name.