

GARDEN DESIGN TRENDS OVER FOUR DECADES

By **Phoebe Jayes** - May 11, 2021



Garden by Robin Templar Williams. Credit: Nicola Stocken

In celebration of its 40th anniversary this year, the **Society of Garden Designers (SGD)** asks ten leading designers and members to reveal the most popular garden design trends over the past four decades.

The way we use our gardens has changed over the past year. Confined to our homes, gardens have transformed themselves into multi-functional spaces. They at once provide a place for us to work, play and socialise. But gardens have always evolved with the times.

Just as in our homes, the design of our gardens and what we do in them is influenced by prevailing fashions and changing lifestyles. Read on to learn about garden design trends over the past four decades, as identified by ten of the SGD's leading designers.

Garden design trends over four decades:



Garden by Robin Templar Williams. Credit: Martin Phelps

Garden plot to outdoor room

When he began designing 30 years ago, James Scott MSGD explains that “people viewed their gardens simply as a place to be ‘gardened’”. Over time, this perception has changed, with gardens increasingly being seen as an extension of the house. The designer feels that outside areas now offer the opportunity to be ‘styled’ in the same way as a room.

As a result, “garden design has grown up” – according to Juliet Sargeant FSGD – who adds that gardens have become far more sophisticated and incorporate a wonderful variety of materials, features and plants that weren’t even considered 20 years ago.

According to Andy Sturgeon FSGD, there has been a gradual move towards a contemporary garden that uses materials minimally and follows a more naturalistic, wild and informal approach.



Garden by Wilson McWilliam Studio

Formal beds to wild meadows

Plants, more than any other aspect of a garden, are followers of fashion. From the traditional herbaceous borders of the 1980s and 90s, to the New Perennial Movement of the late 20th century and finally the unstructured, wildlife-friendly aesthetic popular today, Sarah Eberle FSGD believes, "you can date a garden by its plants."

Andy Sturgeon, who designed his first garden in 1983, says, "When I started out, shrubs were the backbone of everything anyone did. Perennials were a sideshow. Now, wildflower meadows, new perennial planting and grasses have taken centre stage."

Cleve West MSGD agrees. "Grasses were a novelty when I started designing. Today, I can't imagine not using them."

Andrew Duff MSGD, vice chair of the Society of Garden Designers, has also noticed a change in the way plants are laid out. Recently, mass planting has become popular, as well as a trend for leaving seed heads on display to add interest in the colder months.

Some plants, of course, never go out of fashion. Debbie Roberts MSGD says, "The English Country Garden style of roses, lavender and traditional borders of softer flower colours is still very popular". Meanwhile, Juliet Sargeant is delighted to see hydrangeas back in fashion after twenty-five years in the shadows.



Gorse Hill House, garden by Acres Wild

Staying local

Unsurprisingly, a burgeoning appreciation of the role gardens play in protecting the environment has led to a shift in the type of materials being used.

"With sustainability at the forefront of our minds, high quality and environmentally-friendly products such as porcelain and composite decking have been game-changing," says Andy Sturgeon.

"York stone seemed to be everywhere in the late 90s," says Andrew Wilson. Now, the provenance of garden materials has become increasingly important. Many more people are thinking about where their materials come from and use only locally sourced materials.

"We use more indigenous stone than ever before and far less Chinese or Indian stone," says James Scott.

Sarah Eberle has gone one step further. Since she began designing gardens 40 years ago, Sarah has minimised hard landscaping in favour of a softer, more ecological approach.



'The Chelsea Barrack Gardens' designed by Jo Thompson at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2016

Smaller gardens, greater expectations

With the average house and garden getting smaller year-on-year since the early 80s, garden design has adapted to suit a smaller shape. "Clients expect a great deal from a small space," says Andrew Duff.

"In a large garden you can create journeys, both visual and physical, but this has become more difficult as gardens have become smaller."

James Scott has noticed a trend towards zoned areas to meet the different needs of a household, while Jo Thompson MSGD has developed a multi-functional approach to her designs. "A buttercup-filled meadow is a view, a seat is a piece of art, a rill is a wine cooler, a weeping birch is a shady picnic spot", Jo says.



Garden by Cleve West

Decoration to recreation

If the 50s was all about ornamentation and decoration in the garden, it was the 80s that championed recreation in our outdoor spaces. Since then, the popularity of recreational garden features has soared.

“Long gone is the built-in brick BBQ, the terracotta urn placed on its side among pebbles dribbling water and the gazebo in the corner of the garden”, says Robin Templar-Williams FSGD. Instead, due in part to a warmer climate, we are seeing the rise of the outdoor kitchen, says Sarah Eberle.

More elaborate entertainment areas have also become popular, feels James Scott. “Outdoor seating areas have really caught people’s imagination in recent years, with features like the firepit extending the use of the garden later into the evening and indeed the colder months.”



Garden by Cleve West

Greener spaces to sustainable ecosystems

Gardens have not always been as green as they appear. A renewed focus on climate change, however, has resulted in more people aiming to create sustainable gardens.

“A greater understanding of biodiversity has definitely made people reevaluate their priorities in recent years,” says Cleve West, a notion with which Andrew Duff agrees.

“We have seen a greater respect for sustainability and environmental issues. The popular preference has returned to a more natural way of designing with appropriate plants and planting compositions.”

“People are starting to consider garden planting as part of a habitat rather than purely ornamental”, says Andrew Wilson.

James Scott observes that clients are more interested in attracting wildlife and encouraging biodiversity in their gardens.



Garden by Andrew Duff

Niche to norm

Though our tastes might change over time, we will always want our gardens to be beautiful places of escape. Perhaps the most significant change in recent decades, then, has been our attitude to garden design itself. No longer considered the preserve of the wealthy, more and more people are understanding the importance of good design.

"When I started out people literally didn't know what a garden designer was," says Andy Sturgeon, who credits Terence Conran and Ikea for teaching people the value of good design.

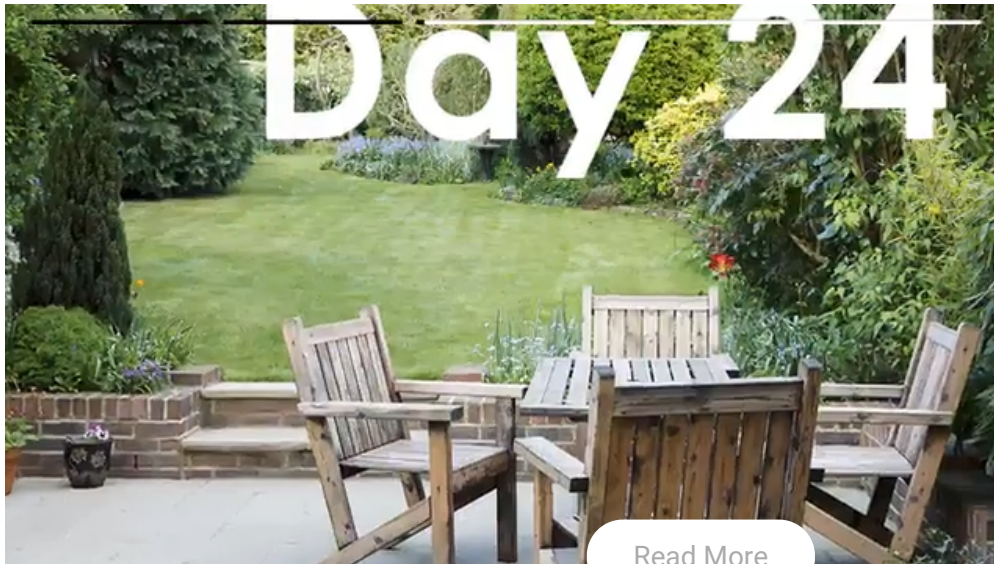
"Now everyone knows what we do and understands the many benefits of it. Today, the attitude and vision of our clients means we have created some amazing gardens that were unimaginable years ago."

"Over the last 40 years, garden design has entered the popular consciousness," agrees Debbie Roberts.

"In the 1980s it was very niche. Soon, however, a well-designed garden will be as important as a well-designed kitchen."

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