

INSIDE THE GARDEN COMPANY

IN ITS 30TH YEAR, **THE GARDEN COMPANY'S** MANAGING DIRECTOR **JAMES SCOTT** TALKS ABOUT THE BUSINESS'S NEW BRANDING AND ITS GRADUAL GROWTH OVER THREE DECADES

You may have noticed that The Garden Company's branding received a makeover earlier this year. It hasn't undergone a complete overhaul, though – one of the most important aspects for managing director James Scott was that the branding be recognisable but with a modern update, like the logos of big brands such as Bovril or Lloyds Bank.



The new look is to celebrate the company's 30th anniversary this year. "I came up with the branding 30 years ago and we've never changed it," says James. "We're really proud of our heritage and our 30 years, but we also wanted to show that we're a contemporary, forward-looking business. We have completely redesigned our website as well, which has been a labour of love – it took many more hours than I'd anticipated, but we're really proud of it."

The website needed to showcase the design and build company's bespoke offering and its focus on plants. "What we do is very handcrafted. Every garden we do is designed

and built around the individual client, the setting and the sense of place, as opposed to having a particular company style."

This has been the case since the company was founded in 1991. James made the decision to set up his own company at the age of 23 with his business partner at the time, Kathie Coss. He had worked as a designer and contracts manager for London-based Capital Garden Landscapes for just over a year, straight after

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completing his landscape diploma at Merrist Wood, and was eager to run his own business. James and Kathie bought a van and began dropping leaflets through people's doors around Hampstead.



JAMES SCOTT

©Clive Nichols

"It was probably one of the best decisions I made but also one of the daftest. If I were advising someone now, I'd recommend going to work for a few well-regarded companies first to learn how they do things. Even though I had a reasonably good job – at the age of 21, I'd managed to get a job as a designer and manager, which gave me some great experience in London – I was still very inexperienced. The flip side is that, in your early 20s, you can get away with a few mistakes – you're not trying to pay a mortgage or support a family. It worked out okay for me in the end, anyway."

Since it was founded, the company has grown steadily and organically, starting to take on employees after a couple of years – and this is where James says he learned his biggest lessons. "Every time the company grew, I always found getting to that next stage a challenge. What I

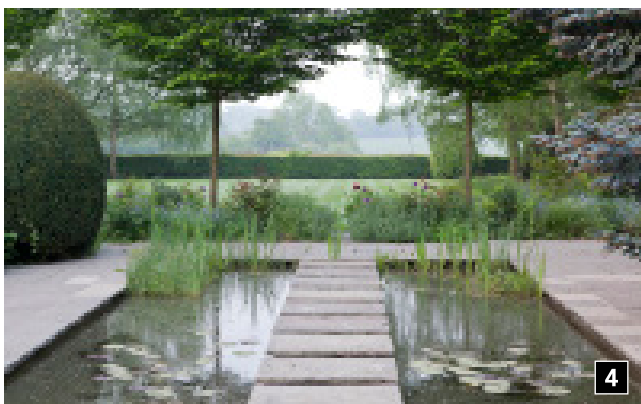


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quickly learnt was you can't do it without the people that you employ, so they became absolutely key – looking after them, treating them well. The first time I employed team leaders to run projects instead of me it was really hard, and trying to employ my first managers was really difficult because it wasn't something I had learnt how to do. There were always barriers to get through, which is probably the same for everybody trying to set up a business."

It's been worth the effort, though. The company's longest-serving employee has just retired after 22 years with the business, and the other three landscape team leaders have been with The Garden Company for over a decade. "One of the things I can't state highly enough is the skill of the team leaders. They're gold dust."

Alongside the landscape team leaders, the company's horticulture and gardening services are headed up by Joanna, and landscape architect Molly joined four years ago to develop the company's use of CAD. James' wife Helen joined the year before to focus on business development and marketing, following a background in management consultancy. "We're not a large company, but we employ 20 people now. and when I look at those people I'm really proud. Most are homegrown; they came to

us with little experience with other companies and now they're absolutely top industry people."

Over the last three decades, as The Garden Company has developed, James and his business partner Kathie realised they had

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different ambitions, though, and decided it was time to go their separate ways. James bought out Kathie's half of the company around six years ago, but the two remain good friends since. "It was a very amicable separation. I was probably more ambitious to drive the business forward at that point and Kathie left me to do that, she was happy to let me buy her out. I think it's worked out brilliantly for me and for Kathie, who is very happily semi-retired."

James says he was ambitious to grow the business from the start, and he saw trade

associations as a great way of achieving this. Merrist Wood College had instilled in him an admiration of the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI), and so he joined it as soon as he could to put the company's projects in for BALI National Landscape Awards. Winning these helped boost The Garden Company's exposure and it gradually started winning bigger and better projects.

An affiliation to trade associations and professional bodies has continued throughout James' career – he has served on the Society of Garden Designers' council and on the committee for BALI. "It was great to put something back in, but I got a lot out of it as well. In the early days of my business, I was quite involved in BALI and I met a lot of key industry figures through that. So, I discussed the challenges I was having in my business with other contractors and it would be reassuring if they were facing similar challenges or they would give me a different angle on how to approach these challenges. Without being ▶

1 Rural retreat, Tring, Hertfordshire

2 English oasis, London ©Rebecca Bernstein

3 James at drawing board

4 Wildlife pond, Bovingdon ©Rebecca Bernstein

5 Modern family garden, Kings Langley, Herts

involved in trade associations and having benchmarks against other business, I don't think I would have been able to grow the business as I have. It's a huge network to tap into. The late, great John O'Conner, for instance – although running a very different business – often gave me words of wisdom."

The Garden Company is now one of the UK's most well-known and respected design and build companies and providing both of these services has been hugely beneficial. "From a client point of view, it's a very attractive offering. Often, they don't want to deal with lots of different people. It can also be more cost-effective because it only needs one person managing the project, as opposed to having a designer and someone from a contracting company being paid to manage it.

"From our point of view, it makes it really seamless. We can design gardens right from the outset and design buildability into the gardens, we have a lot of experience in doing that. So, we create gardens that are more likely to happen and we consider client budgets from the start. And we have complete control over the project. So, for us, it's about quality control. However, this is not the only way that we work – we also regularly collaborate with other professional designers, building to their designs."

As well as design and build, The Garden Company also provides a gardening service. "We don't really like the term 'maintenance'. Gardening is a hugely underrated skill; the ability to nurture something as envisaged, and to tend and sculpt a garden as opposed to weeding it and cutting the lawn, is a real art. It needs foresight and vision."

Each service can be part of a package or as a standalone offering. "Our ideal scenario is that we would design, build and then look after it and nurture the garden. But we also look after gardens that other people have designed and

built, and gardens where no professional design and landscaping has been involved."

Of all its services, it's the design aspect of the business which has soared in popularity over the last year. Despite shutting down for a month at the start of the first lockdown in March, The Garden Company was able to reopen following advice and help from trade associations such as

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**JAMES WITH
TEAM LEADER GLEN**

BALI. It cut back on subcontractors, such as bricklayers, to minimise the number of people on site at one time, but also because James says he was "quite protective of the work we had in the order book".

"I wasn't sure how things were going to pan out and, to be honest, I was quite pessimistic. The reality, though, is that it has been incredibly buoyant and we have been as busy as ever.



We had a dip in turnover last year – but it was controlled, and we still had a good profitable year. I didn't predict it at the start, but it makes sense now – everybody tuned into their gardens. We're doing around double the amount of design work as we were a year ago, which is phenomenal. The amount going through the build hasn't doubled, though.

"The only potential blot on the horizon is that, at some point, there's likely to be an economic downturn because of the cost of COVID-19. I personally thought it was going to happen last year, but it didn't materialise."

This doesn't stop James from being confident about the year ahead, though. The company is currently looking to recruit a new contracts manager, or a contracts manager with some design capabilities. And when we ask if The Garden Company will remain the same size going forward, James remains as ambitious as ever.

"It's hard to say, 'I'm happy and I'm going to stand still'. We are constantly looking to cement our position at the high end of the industry. It is important that we keep our profile high by delivering high quality projects and winning awards! And we have a constant drive to do things better, to win exciting projects. It's always a case of pushing the business forward, but in a fairly controlled and organic way; we will be looking to gently grow the business."

The new branding seems to be just the start of the next phase for The Garden Company, with quality set to remain at the heart of whatever comes next.



6 Walled garden, Sarratt, Herts

7 Bespoke pergola, London ©Rebecca Bernstein

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