

# 30 years on and still great company

by Darren Taylor  
An interview with  
James Scott MBAL

BALI Award-Winner,  
Sarratt, Hertfordshire



Multi-purpose family garden



Wildlife pond  
Photo credit:  
Rebecca Bernstein





Garden with a view  
Photo credit:  
Rebecca Bernstein



James Scott  
MBALI MSGD

**A**ccredited Contractor The Garden Company is celebrating three decades in business and to celebrate, Editor Darren Taylor was invited to learn more about the company from Accredited Designer, Managing Director, James Scott MBALI.

**DT** - Let's rewind the clock. Why professional landscaping?

**JS** - It was my grandparent's Cotswold garden and orchard that first inspired my love of nature and landscapes. After that, I didn't have a particular career in mind until I spent a summer working for a forestry company at the age of 18. I met someone there who'd studied landscaping at Merrist Wood College in Surrey. Switching to Merrist Wood and landscaping was a key decision for me, and in the short term meant that I gained from a year working in the US and also having one of my garden designs selected to be built on Main Avenue RHS Chelsea (Silver-Gilt in 1989!). Although I certainly wasn't the most diligent student, I was awarded the accolade of having produced the best design projects when I graduated. After college, I joined Capital Garden Landscapes in Highgate as a Designer/Manager (quite a learning curve at 21). I was responsible for the whole process: taking enquiries, drawing up plans and managing the build. Not to mention line-managing people older than my parents and handling clients with exacting requirements. Two years later, in 1991, I set up The Garden Company in Chipperfield near Hemel Hempstead with my business partner Kathie Coss, who retired from the business several years ago.

**DT** - As multi-award-winning National Landscape Awards winners, do you have any advice for our Associate members looking to enter in the future?

**JS** - It's definitely worth the effort. Writing awards entries takes time and energy, but the benefits of winning make it worthwhile. I believe that The Garden Company's awards track record helps us to stand out from other businesses in a crowded market. It gives prospective clients a sense of reassurance that we know what we are doing! Every award brings with it great marketing opportunities – not only to prospective clients, but to other business partners and even potential new recruits. I also think it's very motivational to be recognised by the judges and fellow professionals, who really understand what is involved in creating a beautiful, bespoke garden – not only for me, but also for my team members who have put in the hard work.

As for specific advice to members looking to enter for the first time, obviously it's vital to choose a successful scheme that has a bit of a 'wow' factor. The quality standard is high and something special needs to make the project stand out. Then – allow sufficient time to write your entry and collate the images – don't leave it until the night before the deadline! Study the awards criteria and make sure your responses stay on point. I also think it's great for your client to provide a meaningful testimonial, showing how you have brought their garden dreams to life.

**DT** - Would you say that there is a wider problem facing the industry with public perception of valued landscapes?

**JS** - Yes! Despite our heritage as a nation of garden lovers and years of popular TV gardening programmes, it seems that we still have difficulty helping people to understand the value of the professional services that we offer and the skills, knowledge and experience that we deploy.

This concerns me on two levels. Firstly, how can we expect to attract people into landscaping roles if the work is misunderstood and undervalued? With Brexit now in place, combined with an ageing workforce, employers throughout landscaping are faced with an ever-more challenging 'war for talent' and urgent skills shortages. Secondly (and as your question suggests), how can we expect our clients to appreciate the 'value-add' in our services, if we are seen as providing low-skilled, low-budget instant 'makeovers'?

On a positive note, there are hugely talented young people already enjoying early success in our industry. Over the last few years, I have enjoyed attending Pro Landscaper's presentation of awards to the 'Next Generation - 30 Under 30'. This is a great initiative that seeks to recognise and reward the achievements of inspiring young people in design, build and horticulture. It's wonderful that Pro Landscaper is driving this forward, and of course there are other initiatives that share the goal of inspiring more young people – including your very own GoLandscape initiative.



Rural retreat,  
Tring, Hertfordshire



BALI Award Winner,  
Rickmansworth, Herts

However, with regard to TV programme makers, the media and the wider public's perception of what we do and how we do it: there is still a very long way to go. Of course, every time we talk to prospective clients, we need to demonstrate our value and help people to appreciate the range of disciplines that we draw on – design, hardscaping, softscaping, horticulture, planning regulations...I have always seen this as part of the 'day job', but I would love to think that it could be made easier in future through a wider understanding of our services. We are lucky to have various trade associations, societies and others working hard on our behalf to address both the 'war for talent' and our industry's professional reputation.

**DT - Do you tend to use regular suppliers for the soft and hard landscaping elements, or is it more about the location and the needs of the project?**

**JS -** We have longstanding working relationships with a limited number of key suppliers, in both hardscaping (Accredited Suppliers CED Stone Group and London Stone) and softscaping (Accredited Suppliers Rochfords and Europlants UK). We genuinely view these working relationships as business partnerships, and we work collaboratively with our suppliers to achieve outcomes that are mutually beneficial. I feel that the relationships are characterised by trust, professional respect and open communication, and I hope that they feel the same! Suppliers help us to control costs, pricing variations, security and reliability of supply; and if needed they give us good, joint problem-solving and aftercare capability.

In our view, our regular suppliers benefit too - from good visibility of the 'order pipeline'; receiving payments on time, within payment terms; our willingness to resolve any problems jointly; plus of course PR and marketing opportunities on prestigious domestic and commercial sites.

However, the location and needs of the project are vitally important too and at times we need to source hardscaping or softscaping materials that are unique or somewhat different to our usual requirements. Like any responsible design and build business, we are highly committed to protecting the environment – by reducing the negative environmental impact of what we do, and actively seeking opportunities to have a positive environmental effect. With this in mind, we design with vernacular materials in mind, taking advantage of local resources which are relatively energy efficient and sustainable.

**DT - What percentage of your business is domestic landscaping compared to commercial design and build?**

**JS -** Most of our work is in domestic design and build. Around 20% is commercial, this varies from year to year. Some of our most interesting projects have been in this category, including prestigious business parks, corporate head offices and several schools. We are honoured to have collaborated with the head gardener at the historic Temple Gardens in London's legal district for several years, helping to restore some areas to their former glory after damage sustained during the Second World War and some unsympathetic repairs afterwards.

**DT - How many projects do you have on at any one time?**

**JS -** There are usually 3-4 landscape build projects underway, and our maintenance business services 60-plus clients. The company's chief operational areas are North London and South East England, although we can deliver design services nationally. There are around 20 of us in total, including a small office-based team made up of our Horticultural and Gardens Manager Joanna, Landscape Architect Molly, a vacant position for a Contracts Manager and – importantly! – our Accounts function, handled by Barbara. Not to forget my wife Helen who works from home, taking the lead on marketing and business development.

**DT - With the company founded in 1991, pre-Internet, how has the importance of digital complemented your business model? What can you do now that you couldn't do before?**

**JS -** It was indeed pre-Internet when we started out with two people, one vehicle and a handful of clients. At the same time, and to put things in context, John Major was in his first year as Prime Minister, Nirvana was topping the charts and people were queuing at the cinema to watch Home Alone. I didn't have a mobile phone for the first two years, and I used to take my handwritten notes to a local typist.

There have been limitless opportunities to apply digital technology to what we do since then, and we have applied new ways of working in many ways. However, I believe it is the integration of new technology along with the retention of some traditional methods that



has helped us to be efficient and to enhance our customer services.

We have developed an approach which integrates the use of CAD and associated technology with traditional hand drawing. We also use software to improve the presentation of mood boards and planting plans.

Technology has helped us to greatly enhance our communications with clients, prospective clients, professional designers, suppliers and each other. We have replaced many traditional paper-based systems with digital methods. File-sharing software is a huge help, along with smartphones enabling us to share images from landscaping site to office and suppliers.

Most recently, our prime focus in terms of technology has been the creation of a new, born digital brand identity and website, both of which were launched in February. The website is our main source of enquiries and we haven't paid for any advertising for a long time. The new website reflects our brand identity through key messages, tone of voice and visual appeal including videos showing the customer 'journey' when working with us. Our aim has been for the content to be SEO-friendly and to the highest user experience standards.

I have no doubt that the bar will continue to rise, and I am interested to see what happens in the near future with newer approaches, especially VR and AR technologies.

**DT - By offering a full design and build service, do you find this setup works well for prospective clients initially when trying to secure the work?**

**JS -** Our primary offering is a 'one-stop shop' for clients – an end-to-end design and landscaping service that supports them every step of the way. We do find that clients love this approach, as it guarantees our personal involvement through every stage of their garden transformation. We understand their dreams at the outset and - because we are designers and landscapers - we can ensure that the dreams translate into a practical reality. We design with 'buildability' in mind and we bring our landscaping craftsmanship and attention to detail together to make sure that the build quality is of the highest standard.

However, we also make it clear to clients from the start of the process that our design offering is the same

whether we are going to build or not. Clients are always free to use another contractor. Our pricing is the same for design work whether or not we are going to build. There can be a cost saving for the client in that there is no separate management fee. Obviously, we prefer to build ourselves as this gives us quality control over the outcome and a good income stream! We love to see projects all the way through and think that our landscaping offering does help us to secure design work. We also collaborate with other designers, building to their designs.

**DT - What does being an Accredited Contractor mean to you?**

**JS - Accreditation with your Trade Association provides many benefits - to me personally and to the company overall.**

Firstly, it helps us all to stay up to date with best practices. As owner-manager of a small business, it is vital not to be left behind regarding best practice, but also a challenge to find the time and resources to focus on improvement opportunities and industry trends. Statutory requirements and regulations are in a constant state of flux, along with developments in new products, new technology and ever-expanding client expectations. Being a member helps me to stay up to date and to ensure that – along with my management team and staff – we remain competitive, and we continuously improve. This includes giving us ready access to relevant professional information and expert advice; and the professional

development opportunities over the years have been invaluable to me personally and to my management team too in terms of high-quality conferences, open days and (during COVID-19) remote webinars.

Secondly, accreditation is very helpful in terms of sales and marketing. Prospective clients are (rightly!) discerning and in search of the best quality services and value that they can find. Winning work in this environment is not a 'quick sell' and requires careful marketing. We do this ourselves directly of course, but our efforts are boosted significantly with our membership, via the BALI website and other marketing tools including newsletters and publications. Prospective clients are naturally reassured by our certification with a professional trade body. Evidence of winning awards at regional or national levels also provides a type of quality assurance and confidence in our services.

Numerous business benefits arise from meeting and getting to know fellow members. In some ways these people-related benefits are less tangible than others, but that doesn't make them less valuable. Trade associations are basically 'mutual interest groups' which can lead to excellent business opportunities.

Feeling inspired? View case studies and recently completed projects whilst learning more about the company at **[thegardenco.co.uk](http://thegardenco.co.uk)** or contact the team on +44(0)1442 832666 or email **[james@thegardenco.co.uk](mailto:james@thegardenco.co.uk)**.

BALI Award Winner,  
North London  
Photo credit:  
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