

THE FUTURE *is* GREEN

*We take a look at up-and-coming garden designers
and the creative ideas they have to offer for regenerating
Britain's landscape, both urban and rural*

A new generation of garden designers is on the rise. Through a growing range of dedicated courses, increasing numbers of people are being trained and thereafter supported through membership of bodies such as the Society of Garden Designers (SGD) to play an active part in the front-line effort to conserve and establish the natural world in town and country.

The gardens they are creating are not just beautiful and interesting. Many are innovative and have already caught the eyes of judges at prestigious events such as the SGD Garden Design Awards and the RHS flower shows.

Among those celebrating early career success at RHS Hampton Court (the world's largest flower show and 25 years old this year) were recent graduates Stuart Charles Towner and Bethany Williams, whose *Green Seam* design for the regeneration of a former colliery site not only gives the landscape new shape and function, but supports and develops its existing and surprisingly diverse flora. The garden, for the pair's sponsor and alma mater, Hadlow College/University of Greenwich, won Gold and was also awarded Best in Show.

Also at Hampton Court, Esra Parr (see page 157), a recent landscape and garden design

graduate of Capel Manor College, won a Gold medal for her World category garden inspired by and named after *Spirit of the Aegean* for Noble Caledonia, while London College of Garden Design graduate Jon Sims was awarded a Silver Gilt for his show garden for Jacksons Fencing, *Secret Garden Party*, a design for a community of gardeners working separately but within one large plot.

Jon's latest win is proof, if it were needed, that his earlier successes as the SGD's Student

Designer of the Year 2012, and as a finalist in both that category and the Paper Landscapes Award in 2013, were no flashes in the pan. Indeed, since its inception, the Student category of the SGD Awards has been hugely competitive. Last year, the honour went to two winners, Jiyoung Kim and Joanna Midwinter, for two very different but astounding designs.

Jiyoung Kim's *Deep Simplicity*, which aims to help and comfort people with mental health issues, was, said the judges, "An incredibly impressive and dynamic design, and a creative and ingenious use of the site. The concept is phenomenally challenging but the approach to the sheer scale of the project is very mature."

Of Joanna Midwinter's design for the New Great Square at Plymouth Civic Centre, the judges said it was "Practical for public use but extremely beautiful, and with a real ring of truth about it. A mature design that displays a very sensitive approach to dealing with an iconic design by Geoffrey Jellicoe, while creating something wonderful for 21st-century use."

As the Society of Garden Designers' judging panel sits down to consider the 2015 Student entries, we caught up with Joanna Midwinter, to talk to her about her win and to find out what came next. ▷



ABOVE Jiyoung Kim (left) and Joanna Midwinter (right), joint winners of the Student category of the SGD Awards 2014. **BELOW** Part of Jiyoung's design *Deep Sympathy* (left) and Joanna's design for the New Great Square at Plymouth Civic Centre (right).





THIS PICTURE AND LEFT Joanna's vision for revitalising the New Great Square at Plymouth Civic Centre.

JOANNA MIDWINTER ON THE BEGINNINGS OF HER NEW CAREER



Why did you decide to train as a garden designer? "I've always been passionate about gardening and garden design – my grandfather and great grandfather were both professional

gardeners. I've worked as a computer software developer since university, but over the years I've enjoyed a huge sense of satisfaction and consolation from gardening my own little plot and helping family and friends design theirs. I began studying garden design on a part-time basis, but it wasn't until the financial burden of putting my children through university had eased that I felt I could concentrate on gardening as a career."

Where and what have you been studying?

"Having decided to change careers, I needed a course that would consolidate everything I'd learned up to that point, to formalise my way of working and to get up to speed with all the current practices. I chose the full-time, two-year HND Garden and Landscape Design course at Duchy College in Rosewarne. It was led by Matt James, who was a wonderfully enthusiastic and dynamic course leader, and in the second year, which is very tough, we were steered through the modules with great patience and skill by Richard Sneesby."

What was it about the course that suited you so well? "It was wide ranging and covered

all the areas I needed in order to start a career in garden design. We learned how to consult with clients, create briefs and carry out site surveys, as well as how to develop designs using a wide variety of media and to present our ideas. One of the best aspects was that we were able to work on real projects; learning how to understand the owners' requirements and aspirations was invaluable."

Who or what inspires and influences your garden designs?

"I've never been a history buff, but I was surprised by the usefulness of the course's garden and landscape history element. I focused on 20th-century garden design and it introduced me to so much more of the work of the designers I admire, while providing a greater depth of knowledge about my new profession's recent history. Now, when I do a site visit, I have this broad background of styles that frequently inspires me and helps me envisage what will work for the client and the space. I admire many British designers, some of whom I've met through the Society of Garden Designers (SGD). Further afield, my current heroes are Bernard Trainor, Nicole de Vésian, Adam Woodruff and Piet Oudolf."

Have you put any of your designs into practice yet?

"During the course, we worked on real projects and entered several competitions, including the SGD's Garden Design Awards, so I've been able to get to know some of the best contractors in the

business. I've also found that I enjoy meeting clients and discussing their ideas; some of their requests are quite fascinating."

How has the experience affected your design work?

"One of the things I've learned is the importance of having a good network of contractors and suppliers that you can rely on. Garden design is not an impulse buy, so in my first trading year I've been getting to know my local area. I've visited business fairs, given talks, made videos and more, all so that people can get to know and trust me. I've also enjoyed working with new materials and ideas. I'm pretty open minded but working on live projects has helped me to realise that a lot can be gained from exploring new ideas, even if at first they don't appeal."

"I've always tried to make sure my designs are achievable but working with clients brings them more sharply into focus; they ask questions that might never have occurred to me. Using software programs such as AutoCAD, Photoshop and InDesign to draw plans, and 3D programs such as SketchUp to create the garden helps me and my client see how the garden will work."

Tell us about the design for which you were jointly awarded SGD's Student Designer of the Year 2014

"There's no better feeling in a town or city than turning the corner of a depressing street and finding yourself in a green oasis. The brutalist post-war architecture of Plymouth Civic Centre

has been deteriorating and become rather unloved. I wanted to create a design that would revitalise the square in front of the centre, giving it a more garden-based feel that would lift the spirits of people who pass through it every day."

"Geoffrey Jellicoe, one of the greatest landscape architects of the 20th century, created the existing square, so the most difficult challenge was to produce a design that would respect his legacy while making a space that is suitable for the 21st century. There were many aspects to the project, but the key points were to consider how people use the square, to understand how the geometry of the building and the square interact, and to develop a planting scheme that would work within the limitations of budget and the local climate."

What does the future hold for you? "I'm working on a garden for a contemporary house in a stunning coastal location. I love Cornwall and find its climate and environment exciting and inspirational to work with. My intention is to make gardens that have a sense of place, that are beautiful and atmospheric while still being robust and sustainable."

"I'm also keen to try creating show gardens. The Royal Horticultural Society accepted my application to make one at this year's Malvern Show, but I fell short of the funding I needed to go ahead. It was disappointing but I learned a lot from the experience and hope to be at Hampton Court or Chelsea very soon." □

WORDS AND INTERVIEWS: ARABELLA ST JOHN PARKER PHOTOGRAPH: RHS/NEIL HEPWORTH (ESRA PARR'S GARDEN)



ESRA PARR

HAMPTON COURT WINNER

“Being a little older and able to draw on all the creative and people skills and the experience of running my own businesses that I've gathered since leaving school gives me credibility," says newly qualified garden designer Esra Parr, 51 (above, left), who won a Gold medal for her first show garden, *Spirit of the Aegean* (above), at this year's RHS Hampton Court Flower Show. "I think that as most garden design clients are likely to be in their thirties or older, being a little older myself helps me to understand their needs more clearly."

"I wasn't sure garden design was what I wanted to do as a long-term career, and if the initial cost had been high then I probably wouldn't have embarked on the training, but I began by doing a year in horticulture at Capel Manor, one day a week with lots of course work. I followed that with two years of design then finished with a year of practical hard landscaping. Each course led me to the next. I discovered that I enjoyed it and was quite good at it, while the courses gave me the confidence and tools to set up my own garden design business."

“ I wanted to give the square a more garden-based feel that would lift the spirits of people who pass through it every day.”

THINKING ABOUT TRAINING AS A GARDEN DESIGNER?

A certificate, diploma or degree in garden design is increasingly desirable and valuable and the list of colleges offering such courses is extensive. Do as the SGD advises and take time to work out which course is right for you; bear in mind your available study time, budget and final career expectations as you assess each option.

Key points to consider are: what sort of design training does the course offer? How does it cover the business of design? What sort of skills tuition is on offer, and what teaching methods

are used? Compare course credentials with your own preferences (an artistic or horticultural bias, for instance), and the sort of accreditation you want.

An internet search for garden design courses will include relatively long-established colleges such as Writtle College, Capel Manor, Hadlow College, the KLC and the Inchbald School of Design, the RHS, The English Gardening School and London College of Garden Design among the top 20.

For more, visit sgd.org.uk/student_green/Choose_Course.aspx.