The House & Garden guide to the LEADING GARDEN DESIGNERS OF TODAY

Completing her three-part guide to the UK's most talented garden designers, Clare Foster meets 10 rising stars

PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDREW MONTGOMERY**

Our up-and-coming garden designers include (from left) Alice Bowe, James Aldridge, Flora Gathorne-Hardy, Jane Brockbank and Marcus Barnett, who were photographed at the Thames Barrier Park in east London

JAMES ALDRIDGE

There aren't many garden designers who can say they followed their vocation from an early age, but James Aldridge always knew he would work with plants in some form or other. 'As long as I can remember I've been interested in the natural world,' he says. 'I have constantly been drawn to the great wildernesses, and these untouched areas evoke a feeling that influences my work. I'm conscious of the psychological effect of being in a calm, green space.' James studied horticulture at Imperial College London's Wye College, and then worked as a gardener for several years, initially for Rosemary Verey and later at Highgrove, before setting up his own business as a garden-maintenance contractor for top-end garden designers. This was the catalyst that would propel him into design, and he enrolled on a course at the Inchbald School of Design in 1999. After some years' working for other designers – namely Christopher Bradley-Hole and Luciano Giubbilei – James set up his own garden-design business in 2003. Inspired by architects such as John Pawson and Luis Barragán, his work is pared down and simple, with strong architectural structure and precise detailing, contrasting with bold, confident planting finely tuned to each garden's particular environment. Design ethos: 'I want to distil the essence of those wild spaces and combine it with architectural, timeless designs that will bring a sense of calm in an otherwise hectic world.' *www.jamesaldridgedesign.com; 020-7252 8232*

MARCUS BARNETT

Marcus Barnett spent seven years as an officer in the army before taking the sideways step into garden design. 'It was just something I had to do,' he says. Following his heart, he decided to do a course at the Inchbald School of Design in 2003, and has never looked back. The year after he graduated, he designed a courtyard garden at the Chelsea Flower Show with fellow student Philip Nixon (see overleaf). It won best in its category and the pair went on to create a further two award-winning Chelsea show gardens together, putting themselves firmly in the public eye. Meanwhile, Marcus was already running his own design practice, creating private gardens for clients throughout the country, and today his studio is buzzing with enquiries from as far afield as Saudi Arabia and the Dominican Republic. He is also planning an exciting garden, sponsored by *The Times*, for this year's Chelsea Flower Show. Whether the brief is for a slick urban plot or a traditional country garden, Marcus's work always has a modern edge, influenced by modernist architecture. 'It's a classic case of less is more,' he says. To balance this approach, his planting schemes are soft and naturalistic, with an emphasis on perennials, grasses and clipped evergreens. Design ethos: 'Garden design is all about solving challenges in innovative ways. I want my gardens to inject a sense of curiosity, to make people feel they are going on an adventure.' *www.marcusbarnett.com; 020-7736 9761*

ALICE BOWE

At the age of 30, Alice Bowe has achieved what most would hope to do in a lifetime. As well as running a successful garden-design business she writes a regular column in *The Times*, has set up a garden-product website, opened a haberdashery shop, and is publishing her first book this spring. She has a fine-art background, but realised that she wasn't a painter and went straight from her degree course at Oxford to study garden design at the Oxford College of Garden Design in 2003. She was soon thrown in at the deep end when asked to come to look at the garden of an acquaintance. Rearranging a flower bed turned into a major redesign, and she teamed up with fellow student Sarah Price (see overleaf), to carry out the project with aplomb. Since graduating, Alice has taken on projects up and down the country, from a plot for an exciting new-build to a 32-acre estate in Northumberland. Her gardens are diverse in style but all show a passion for colour and plants. 'I started doing an RHS horticulture course but gave up when I realised the best way to learn is by growing things,' she says. Design ethos: 'I take inspiration from all aspects of art, architecture and design, and like to think I paint with plants just as I paint on paper.' *www.alicebowelandscapes.com; 0121-224 7390*

JANE BROCKBANK

With a background in fine art, Jane began her career as an artist and textile designer. But, struggling in the angst-ridden world of art, she worked for a time in a florists' shop, where she realised that designing gardens might be a way of tying together all the things she was interested in. After retraining, Jane started life as a garden designer in 1999. Initially she designed small urban gardens, being 'passed around lots of nice north-London families', and is now designing a much wider range of gardens both in London and further afield. In 2009 she designed an award-winning Chelsea Flower Show garden in collaboration with Angus Thompson (see overleaf). Current projects include the development of a 200-acre estate in Cornwall, and a new collaborative venture with Paul and Pauline McBride of Sussex Prairies. Jane's work is characterised by subtle yet dynamic planting within a modern aesthetic. She focuses on naturalistic planting combinations, with an emphasis on how plants interrelate in nature. 'I like my planting schemes to look as if they've just blown in from the countryside,' she says. She also has a strong commitment to environmentally considerate design, using local and recyclable materials, and local nurseries selling British-grown stock. Design ethos: 'What I'm trying to do is turn up the volume on nature, taking the inherent qualities of a site and intensifying them.' *www.janebrockbank.com; 07944-345272*

'I want my gardens to inject a sense of curiosity'

MARCUS BARNETT

FLORA GATHORNE-HARDY

Flora Gathorne-Hardy specialises in community-based projects and takes an ecological approach to design. Having studied geography and urban design at Cambridge, Flora completed a diploma in landscape design at the University of Central England, before establishing her company, Topio, in 2000. Working with collaborator Miche Fabre Lewin, she offers a landscape-design practice that, she says, 'bridges the sciences and the arts, using creative research and communication skills to help develop highly sensitive and imaginative designs'. Current work includes the wooded landscape around a new Maggie's Centre in Oxford, where she is working with local communities to ensure that the planting and management of the site supports the ecology of the land and people's access to the wider area, and an involvement in a project dedicated to 'greening the Romford ring road'. Central to Flora's approach is the belief that sustainable design stems from working with people as well as plants. 'My passion is to help create spaces where people can connect with nature and themselves, and this means having conversations with the people who use the space,' she says. Her inspiration comes from Geoffrey Jellicoe's seminal book *The Landscape of Man*, which explores the history of man's intervention with the landscape. Design ethos: 'Topio celebrates the art of place and the life of plants, and above all people's relationship with the land.' *www.topio.co.uk; 01865-512255*

RICHARD MIERS

After completing a course in garden design at Merrist Wood College, Cambridgeshire-based Richard Miers worked for leading designer Arne Maynard for seven years. In 2005, he left Arne's practice to set up his own and since then has designed more than 20 private gardens for top-end clients in London and the Home Counties, ranging from a city garden in Mayfair to a 30-acre estate in Norfolk. He also designed a show garden for *The Daily Telegraph/ House & Garden* Fair in 2007. Despite being rooted in time-honoured tradition, his gardens are clean and modern in style, with a strong sense of geometry. 'I focus first on the verticals and horizontals of hedges, trees, paths, terraces, walls and lawns to give a year-round structure,' he says. 'Then within these areas there is room for interesting seasonal planting dictated by site and client.' If there is a theme that runs through his work it is the box hedging that winds its way through his herbaceous borders or stands out in sensuous baroque curves against lawn or gravel. Symmetry is also important, coupled with a sense of balance and proportion, resulting in gardens that are both harmonious and handsome. Design ethos: 'Good garden design is all about teamwork and communication. Translating ideas coherently to both client and contractor is key.' *www.richardmiers.com; 01945-587451*

PHILIP NIXON

In 1999, Philip Nixon gave up a successful career in the City to pursue his dream of becoming a garden designer. He initially volunteered as a gardener at the Chelsea Physic Garden, before doing an MA in garden design at the Inchbald School of Design in 2003. The cut and thrust of the City had instilled a sense of ambition in Philip, and within a year of completing the Inchbald course he had designed an award-winning courtyard garden for the Chelsea Flower Show with Marcus Barnett (see previous page). The pair went on to design two more Chelsea gardens in 2006 and 2007 and Philip produced a fourth in 2008. Since then, he has built up a sizeable portfolio of private gardens, from modern, minimal and architecturally structured urban plots to large country gardens, more traditional in feel, yet with a modern edge. 'I believe in the need for people to reconnect with their gardens, and good design is what will bring that about,' he says. As well as working in the UK, he is designing a rooftop garden in Manhattan, and two gardens in Moscow, including one in partnership with architects Foster + Partners. Collaborating with architects and interior designers is central to his way of working. Design ethos: 'I'm strongly enthused by exploring natural materials and traditional skills within a modern aesthetic.' *www.philipnixondesign.com; 020-7371 0066*

'I draw on the unique attributes of each site'

SARAH PRICE

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Sarah Price is the name on everyone's lips at the moment for her involvement in the design of a new botanical garden in the Olympic Park. Still only 30, Sarah has quickly risen to fame after completing a diploma in residential landscape architecture at the Oxford College of Garden Design in 2004. Creating an award-winning conceptual garden at Hampton Court Flower Show in 2006 opened the way to Chelsea the following year, and again in 2008, when her sensitive planting scheme for the QVC garden won her praise and press coverage. She now designs private and public spaces, although her real passion is for the development of community projects in which she can work across various disciplines. In addition to the Olympic garden, which is arranged into four zones representing the plants that have been introduced to Britain over the centuries, Sarah is working on the landscape for a new Maggie's Centre in Newcastle and a community garden for the charity Thrive. Due to her background in fine art, her designs have a painterly quality with an emphasis on colour, texture and tone, and a finely tuned use of soft and hard materials to define the garden's composition. 'I'm interested in visual culture as a whole,' she says. 'It's important to be open to a range of different stimuli, to train your ears and eyes to absorb everything around you.' Design ethos: 'I draw on the unique attributes of each site, to create enhanced unity, harmony and place – it's all about probing the space, being sensitive to light and revealing the ephemeral beauty within the surroundings.' *www.sarahpricelandscapes.com; 020-7703 3973*

ANGUS THOMPSON

Calling himself 'a modernist at heart', Oxford-based Angus Thompson designs crisp, asymmetric gardens. His love of nature goes back to his childhood in Yorkshire, where he grew up with beautiful countryside on his doorstep and a large garden in which to run wild. After completing a degree in history, he spent several years as a jobbing musician, but in 2004 nostalgia got the better of him and he enrolled on a garden-design course at the Inchbald School of Design, and graduated with the Principal's Award. The thread that runs through all his work is biodiversity and the desire to inject a sense of wildness into a modern framework. 'Wildlife gardening doesn't have to be all hemp and sandals,' he says. 'Bird houses can be incorporated as structural features or you can introduce meadow planting in a grid.' In 2009 he designed an award-winning Chelsea garden with Jane Brockbank (see previous page) that epitomised his philosophy. 'Nature Ascending' combined raised timber boardwalks with multilayered planting that aimed to demonstrate the range of biodiversity that can be encouraged in even the smallest of spaces. With several private gardens in progress, Angus is also involved in a project to create a transient, reconstructable roof terrace for an F1 motor home. 'It's a huge pleasure seeing things going from the drawing board to reality,' he says. Design ethos: 'Simplicity and clarity drive my desire to create sleek, modern gardens that are also wildlife friendly.' *www.angusthompsondesign.com; 07833-684491*

JO THOMPSON

Jo Thompson's former life as a drama teacher stood her in good stead for her second career in garden design. 'Making a garden is a bit like setting a stage or putting on a creative show,' she says. Jo set up her Kent-based practice in 2004 after a course at the English Gardening School in Chelsea. She now designs private gardens mainly in the south-east, but increasingly further afield, and has recently set up offices in Dorset and London. She has also designed two award-winning courtyard gardens at the Chelsea Flower Show, for children's charity Demelza in 2009 and for Thrive in 2010. Thrive, a charity championing horticultural therapy for people with physical and mental disabilities, has reconstructed Jo's garden at its Reading headquarters. 'It's very satisfying to see it being used – and it really works,' says Jo. Her designs, both in the public and private realm, are characterised by geometric lines softened by rich planting, influenced, she says, by time in Italy. They all show an imaginative use of space, with hard landscaping and sensitive planting. Design ethos: 'I aim to reflect my clients' style and taste, so there is a strong visual relationship between inside and outside spaces.' *www.jothompson-garden-design.co.uk; 01622-831536* □

'Good garden design is all about teamwork and communication. Translating ideas coherently is key'

RICHARD MIERS

Continuing the line-up of top new garden designers are (from left) Angus Thompson, Philip Nixon, Jo Thompson, Richard Miers and Sarah Price