

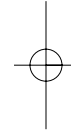
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COURTING THE NEW:
A NATIONAL TRUST
GARDEN WITH A
MODERN AGENDA

**DESIGNER PROFILE:
JINNY BLOM'S
PLANTS AND PLACES**

**SALLY COURT AND
NIGEL GIBSON SEE THE
POSITIVE IN THE DAYLILY**



JINNY BLOM

Sympathetic designs and a love of planting, undertaken with verve and self-belief, are the key to Jinny Blom's garden design practice. Anne Hardy met her to find out more



PERSONAL HISTORY

Jinny Blom studied theatre design and drama at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, from 1979–83. A singing career almost beckoned (she sang and had her own band for many years), but after college she

became a transpersonal psychologist and psychotherapist, which she pursued for nine years.

With a lifelong love of plants and gardens and a desire to do something else with her life, becoming a garden designer seemed a serendipitous way to combine the two main passions in her life: people and plants. Initially

she worked with Dan Pearson (joining him in 1996), before leaving to set up her own design practice (in 2000) in Clerkenwell, London. She shares the office space with landscape designer Tom Stuart-Smith and landscape historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan.

Born in England to a French mother and British father, Blom spent childhood holidays in France mixing with her French family of artists, singers and ceramicists. "They were, and are, a major influence," she says. From this eclectic cultural and professional mix emerges her style, mostly self-taught, which informs her contemporary gardens.

On the shelves of Jinny Blom's London office are long rows of sizeable folders containing her current projects. With 16 of them 'live' (some on extensive timescales stretching beyond 2006), I comment that she is a busy woman. "Yes, I do push myself. Ask my spouse!" she jokes.

These large projects, often for prestigious private clients, usually incorporate an element of rebuild to the house. As a result Blom has to work closely with the architect, something she evidently enjoys: "I like collaborating with the architect, as architecture is a key interest of mine and it informs a lot of my work. I particularly enjoy the work of Carlo Scarpa." She adds: "I feel it is crucial that there is an intellectual rigour underpinning the aesthetics of designing outside space." This, it is clear, is her overriding mantra to successful landscape design.

NATURE NEEDED

Blom's reputation has grown over the last few years, particularly as someone who responds sympathetically — and with a light touch — to the surrounding environment. She explains: "Nature is important. My aim is for my designs to be spectacular in a quiet way." With many of the projects being in Sites of Special Scientific Interest, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty or of historic significance, detailed research into the location becomes a crucial part of the brief. "There is often a lot of initial research to be done and I find it a good starting point," she states. "No project starts without detailed mapping of trees and planting. I ensure the best use is made of the existing, indigenous species and then I aim to set in place ways of establishing good husbandry for the future."

The concept of the right plant in the right place is an important principle for Blom. She says: "Principally, I am a plantswoman and not only want the right plant for the environment, but also plants that suit the client. The planting scheme should be a continuing source of pleasure to my clients and their families long into the future."



Left: A view into The Garden House, Northamptonshire (2000). The new-build villa house is set in a listed walled garden, so Blom's design needed to address the romantic nature of the house and bring the whole development together. A simple formal quartered design was created with blues, greys and whites the prominent colours.

MANIPULATING THE SPACE
During the interview, Blom pulls out a fat folder of a current project in Surrey and we 'walk' round the estate's garden. "I am interested in the hierarchy of a space," she explains, "not in the social sense, but in a sense of protection." By manipulating the space, access and privacy levels, different areas of the estate are signified rather than made obvious. Approaching the house there is a sense of expectation and occasion, and the views of the natural landscape give way to a more formal atmosphere of topiary and other built structures.

"Do you eat, sleep and think gardens?" I ask. She laughs and replies, "Yes! I care about what I do, so you can't help but notice when things are done badly. For example, it is jarring when I see planting that is not in harmony with the native species of an area. If you see a *Robinia pseudoacacia* 'Aurea' in a rural, countryside location, then that really will be obvious and glare at me."

WAYS OF WORKING

After leaving the theatre design and drama course in 1983, Blom became a Jungian psychotherapist — possibly one of the reasons why she enjoys the

interaction between herself, client and contractor. "People are a principal interest: I don't analyse them, but I do have an acute ear for what people say and how they are saying it." She continues: "I am good at getting people to express themselves and I am interested in hearing what they have to say and how they manifest that in the world."

Expanding on this, Blom says that she is not interested in foisting her style on her clients or having her name stamped on her gardens, but she does hold clear design ideas of what works and what doesn't. She concludes: "For me, the process of

Above right: Jinny Blom. Below: Intermingled planting in a West Country farm, designed by Blom in 2001. Here *Echinops ritro*, *Achillea* 'Summerwine' and *Rosa chinensis* 'Mutabilis' grow together.



ALL IMAGES (UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED): JINNY BLOM

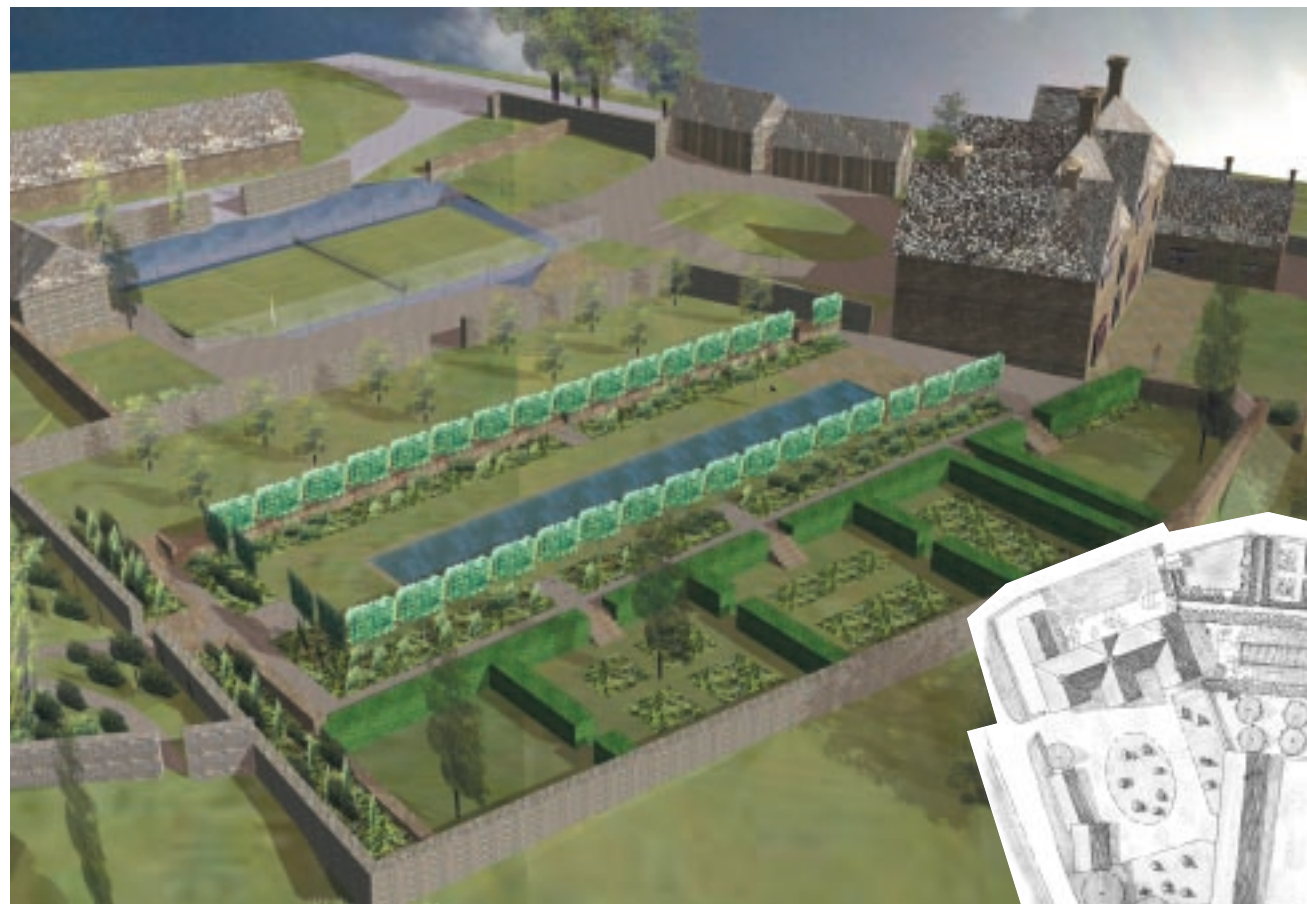
DESIGNER PROFILE **JINNY BLOM**

making a garden is a dynamic one and a relationship has to develop. I want to find exactly the right avenue of trust as it is important to me that my clients like their garden."

As someone who is self taught — she has no formal garden design qualifications — doing things her own way has obviously paid off. "I didn't start out as a businesswoman, but as the business has grown, so have I. It is important that I am focused, legally proficient and thorough in all my business concerns," Blom explains.

Leaving her busy office I considered this curious juxtaposition of determination and sensitivity. To be subtle in a world that is manifestly not so is an act that takes vision and a consistently determined approach. It is also a plan of longevity and one that is difficult to pull off. It is a testimony to Blom's passion for plants and gardens that not only does she pull it off, but that she does so with panache.

ANNE HARDY IS A WRITER AND GARDEN DESIGNER BASED IN SURREY. Email: anne@annehardy.co.uk



DESIGN AND DRAWING

All of Blom's drawings are black and white rendered in soft pencil (*below*) — she finds colour unnecessary. With an aversion to axonometric drawings, she uses sections instead, and sometimes computer graphics (*see left, created using 3D Studio Viz and Key Terrafirma software*). She agrees with Thomas Church that drawings are a good way "to get you started" and believes that "drawings are an object of communication". She continues: "I take my drawings to clients and draw over them as we talk. I use the drawing and writing on the plans, as a way of notation to use in the studio later. It is a good way to elicit what the other person responds to." She adds: "During this process, if my client says they don't like something I take it out (even if it we come back to it later and it goes back in!). I want them to be comfortable and feel they are in possession of the process."

Far left and left: Computer model (*and Blom's plan, inset*) of a Cotswold garden in the Windrush Valley. The house is listed Grade I, and has had no garden to speak of. The design is inspired by historic research which seeks to revive the building — Blom is working with architect Ptolemy Dean on the project.

WORKING PRACTICES

Blom uses a pool of contractors, as most of her projects go out to tender (*below*). All the contractors are large established companies as they have to be capable of executing projects in excess of £100,000. She expects a high quality finish with all work done to perfection. In the past she has found that the smaller contractors struggle with the bigger plants and large quantities of plant material required — plus the fact that their business could falter with the financial commitment of the attending defects and liabilities clauses in her contracts. "I enjoy a good relationship with my contractors and it is always interesting working with them to find other solutions and ideas," she believes.



CONTACT DETAILS

Jinny Blom. Tel: 020 7253 2100. Website: www.jinnyblom.com

BLOM'S FAVOURITE . . .

→ **public garden**
Hidcote Manor, Gloucestershire (circa 1967). "The planting and cakes were great! It wasn't a visitor attraction at that time, just sophisticated, simple and beautifully kept with wonderful husbandry. A classic English garden approached through a strawberry field."

→ **private garden**
"My great Uncle Peter's garden in Shropshire, as it had everything from a huge cedar tree and croquet lawn, to beautiful walled kitchen gardens. It also had very exciting woods with a hermitage hidden away within them."

→ **plant**
"How can you possibly chose one plant?"

→ **hard material**
"At the moment I am keen on flint, because I am working a lot in chalk areas, but this changes depending on the circumstances."

→ **book**
Katherine Everett's *Bricks and flowers*. "The story of a determined woman. She was 76 when she wrote it and it is a chronicle of her life."

HUMOUR AND AMBITION

Even though Blom gives a serious and thoughtful interview, appealing flashes of her unconventional humour appear. When asking what she desires, she replies: "Actually, I think that somehow by working in garden design David Bowie will mysteriously tunnel up into my world and realise that I am the absolutely perfect singer for a new album he is recording. Or maybe better, I get to record a load of Neil Young songs with Mike Garson who plays piano on Aladdin Sane!"

Below: Blom has a wide range of clients who in turn provide her with a broad scope of projects. In 2000 she was appointed to work on an historically-significant estate in the Scottish Highlands. She states: "This was an opportunity to synthesise my core fascinations — art, ecology, restoration and modernism." Work included renovation of a Victorian alpine garden.



ANDREW LAWSON



Above left: Romantic, informal and predominantly white planting at a garden in Northamptonshire.

Above right: Work in progress in Scotland. Blom enjoys working with contractors, so long as they can fulfil her level of expectation.