

THINK ACRES WILD and generous, curvaceous borders between broad sweeps of meadow grass spring to mind; swathes of single-species planting fronting expansive, arcing hedges leading to gently framed vistas. Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith have been making the design of these fluid, unpretentious spaces look easy since they left university 20-odd years ago. But beneath each relaxed scheme lies a subtle but strong framework of serious structural geometry, carefully composed in such a way that it doesn't scream 'design'.

Probing Debbie and Ian for endearing memories of how helping grandpa on his allotment or being given their first packet of seeds aged two prompted them to take up garden design is fruitless. The simple truth is that A-levels in geography, maths and art, plus art college and an interest in conservation, returned Landscape Architecture as one of the few attractive degree options. And so they met at Leeds Polytechnic (now Leeds Metropolitan University), realised they both came from Sussex, and got on really well. "We found that we were drawn to the same types of projects on our course, so it just felt like a natural thing to set up a business together," Debbie says. They formed Acres Wild straight after graduating in 1988. Ian is pragmatic about their lack of early gardening love: "We are able to concentrate on the big picture without getting sidetracked by the detail of individual plants". ➤

A NATURAL BALANCE

DEBBIE ROBERTS AND IAN SMITH
FROM ACRES WILD GARDEN DESIGN
BRING THE INSIDE OUT WITH THEIR
SYMPATHETIC AND MINIMALIST DESIGN

Words Emma Reuss Photos Ian Smith, Acres Wild







Top: Fluid, unpretentious spaces are the trademark of Acres Wild
Above: Hard landscaping is pared back, using only the minimum amount to fulfil the brief
Right: A Japanese-style garden in Buckinghamshire



➔ **A positive start**

They thought seriously about the company name; ‘Roberts and Smith’ just didn’t cut it. “We thought ‘Acres’ was good because it’s very English (not hectares) and it suggests that we like to work on larger scale projects. And we were interested in creating wild gardens at the time, so it all fitted,” says Debbie. “And it begins with A, which is good!” adds Ian.

They worked on large-scale projects from the start – but were three-acre sites a daunting prospect so early on? “We were designing entire river valleys at university, so it didn’t feel like a big thing for us; more like, ‘that’s a really nice scale, I can get my head round that,’” Debbie says.

After a slow patch during the early 90s, they’ve had a constant stream of work – ever since an encounter with an old school friend on a train in 1994 led to a feature about them in *The Times*, which resulted in a number of significant projects. They then got their website up and running and, since then, have been so busy that they employ regular CAD support and have to work at least two Saturdays a month.

Working together

Debbie and Ian see potential clients together but, once a project starts, normally only one of them will see it through, although there is always an open dialogue about every job along the way – “a free and fair exchange of ideas”, as they put it. Their styles have a synergy which makes it impossible to identify the creator. “We have a very functional approach to garden design and because

“We use plants that are good performers, will work well in the space, don’t require huge amounts of maintenance, and are readily available”

we start from the same page, we should arrive at more or less the same solution, whoever is designing,” they agree. Nor do they have different strengths, as they are keen to point out: “We can both do everything, but sharing the business means you can manage jobs better, and

the admin is halved as well. It would be a nightmare for either of us to manage on our own,” says Ian.

Because they are so busy, they have a lead time of six or seven months before they can start a job. That’s a good editing system: the client must have the patience to wait that long, and are then likely to be sympathetic to the timescales involved in establishing a garden, plus they really want to work with the duo. “It often

provides a useful interval, especially for clients who are new to their properties, to reflect on what they want from their gardens”, says Ian. Debbie adds, “We end up

with patient people who really want to work with us and all the rest get filtered out, which suits us completely – we don’t do instant gardens! We have to manage client expectations as it’s going to be two to three years before their garden is going to look the way they expect.”



Left: "I would describe everything we do as relaxed," says Debbie
Below: Tree ferns are interspersed with natural forms sculpted by Si Uwins



"We provide visualisations and try to involve the clients as much as possible, so they know what's going on. We don't want them to get a surprise," says Ian. The visualisations are computer-generated and rendered by hand, which they find the most user-friendly format. "The illustrations clarify the design and make the clients want to move forward. They can see themselves in the space, which they can't with a plan," he adds.

By that time, the clients have already bought into the design philosophy, which they've read on their website: *We respond sensitively to our clients' needs and carefully integrate their house into the garden, and the garden into its surroundings, with plants and materials appropriate to the character and location of each particular site.*

Creating a natural balance

So how does this philosophy translate into the curvy lines and swathes of planting which seem to typify their design style? Much of it is down to the fact that they work on large, rural gardens, working with the natural contours of the land. "We

don't want to impose ourselves too much on the landscape", says Debbie, "so it's more of a subtle intervention as you move further from the house."

Ian agrees, "We go with the flow, we don't want to make things complicated or difficult. Why do things the hard and expensive way when you can achieve a better result by working with what's there? Saying that, I think our designs are very geometric and structural. Our curves tend to be radii that join together, which give a more generous graphic flow, so they're easy to set out and to maintain. There are actually a lot of straight lines and hard edges in there, but once the planting is in, you don't see them as such."

Debbie adds: "It's all about the turning circle of a ride-on mower – you have to be practical! But actually whether a garden is formal or informal is really dependent on the site, the client's taste and the style of house. Designs tend to be more formal nearer the house, but we would describe everything we do as relaxed."

Ian is resistant to the idea of a noticeably common style in their work.

"People may say they can see a particular theme running through our work, but we would say it's what is appropriate to the client, their home, the site and we use any means to make that work; they don't get the latest big design idea from us!"

"It's important for us to work with nature and what it wants to do and find a balance. We don't inflict ourselves on our clients or their gardens, that's why people come to us – we're not celebs," says Debbie.

Sources of inspiration

They are equally reluctant when I ask about gardens or designers that have inspired their work, citing the house, the site and the client as being the principle influences for their designs. "I suppose you can get something from everywhere you go – you absorb ideas, but we wouldn't want to force anything from outside onto a particular garden," says Debbie.

I apply more pressure and they admit to an admiration for the work of Dan Kiley, for its structure, order and generous, yet



Left and below: Inter-connected spaces unite the house and outbuildings with glorious views of rural Hampshire



simple brushstrokes. Howard Hodgkin’s paintings are also mentioned as well as the work of Andy Goldsworthy, the environmental sculptor. Ian concedes that they admire the Dutch and Belgian gardening movement as well as Japanese gardens – in fact they are going to Japan in the autumn on a Japanese Garden Society tour. “I really like the way they use the essence of natural elements in a naturalistic landscape”, he says.

Debbie adds: “The way they manipulate you through a space and make you see different views and aspects and incidents along the way; that’s a big influence. Because we work on large-scale

“Because we work on large-scale gardens, we’re always thinking about the journey and your experiences on the way”

gardens, we’re always thinking about the journey through, and what experiences you may have on the way.”

Less is more

Like many established designers, Debbie and Ian agree that their style has become more disciplined over the years, paring back the hard landscaping as far as possible, using only the minimum amount to fulfil the brief. The planting palette has also become simplified over time. “We use plants that are good performers, will

work well in the space, don’t require huge amounts of maintenance and are readily available. Most clients are interested in the planting effect not the names of the individual plants. Of course there are exceptions to the rule, but generally this is the case,” adds Ian.

Future projects

What does the future hold for Acres Wild? As well as continuing with large-scale projects in this country, Debbie and Ian are working more and more on the Channel Islands, something that really excites them because they get to work with more tender plants and with granite, which is a new material for them. But we won’t be seeing them exhibiting at Chelsea any time soon. “There just aren’t enough reasons for us to do it, and we’d be letting down so many clients who wouldn’t agree that Chelsea was a good enough excuse,” says Debbie.

This successful pairing works so well because both parties have a shared philosophy, a balanced partnership where neither dominates and each knows what Acres Wild intrinsically stands for and where it is going. Understandably this harmonious ethos manifests itself in their garden design, which Debbie decisively sums up as “Not showy; not egotistical; just comfortable; timeless and elegant. That’s what our clients are after when they come to us.”

