



ALL IMAGES: ACRES WILD



DEBBIE ROBERTS AND IAN SMITH

By working together for nearly 20 years, the partnership of Acres Wild has created a free-flowing yet geometrically-structured design style. Beverley Blackburn met them to learn more

Images this page and opposite: Plan and photographs of an Acres Wild garden in East Sussex.

This atmospheric garden, perched on the top of the South Downs, looks over the village and sea beyond. The design relates both to the large-scale sense of place, while also creating more intimate and personal spaces.

Design partnerships in garden design tend to be the exception rather than the rule, and successful collaborations lasting for many years are even more rare. Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith of Acres Wild began their partnership right at the start of their careers when they graduated in 1988 with landscape architecture degrees. Now, 17 years on, they have gained a reputation that has not grown by trail-blazing big design ideas, but is based on something much simpler — they make garden design look easy by creating relaxed, distinctly contemporary compositions without gimmicks.

It is no accident that an Acres Wild-designed garden should appear somehow easy on the eye because of the extraordinary care Roberts and

Smith take in analysing the site and its context. "We tread very lightly on the landscape. First and foremost, we set out to create low-impact designs that work with the landscape rather than altering it radically," explains Roberts. As most of their work involves large-scale country gardens, this site-specific approach has evolved out of necessity. However, the pair first started forming ideas about the direction of their work when they were fellow students at the then Leeds Polytechnic. On a field trip to the Jac. P. Thijssepark and Bos Park in Holland, they were introduced to the possibilities of designing with freer, more naturalistic results. "We saw artificial, designed landscapes that looked entirely natural and the idea that design could work in this way stayed with us," says Roberts.



A SIMPLE APPROACH

Although they do not exclusively define themselves as 'ecological designers' — not least because it would be impractical to build a business on this basis — the broad idea of ecological design fits the overall Acres Wild philosophy of keeping intervention to a minimum.

They use natural materials where practical and create planting schemes that suit the existing ecological conditions. "Plants are used for both aesthetic and functional purposes while sustainability comes somewhere between the two. In essence it is a kind of controlled nature. We don't go as far as only advocating natives because our clients desire flexibility," says Smith. ➔



PERSONAL HISTORY

Debbie Roberts and Ian Smith were brought up in Brighton, East Sussex and Crawley, West Sussex respectively. Smith's early passion for fine art and geography spurred him towards a career in landscape design. Roberts initially studied fashion design, but soon realised that she needed a design discipline with which she could connect on a deeper level. After working for a short time in conservation at Highgate Cemetery, she decided that landscape design would meet that need. The pair met while studying landscape architecture at the then Leeds Polytechnic (1985–88), but became disillusioned because it involved an element of social engineering that neither felt comfortable with. "We wanted to concentrate on design, not planning, so we made the switch to garden design," says Smith. Their first break came in 1988 via a customer at a garden centre who became Acres Wild's first client.





Top: Cedar decking with naturalistic planting in West Sussex. Created in 2003, this garden features *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Ferner Osten', *Verbena bonariensis* and typha species.

Three images above:

One of the most recent projects by Acres Wild is this 'contemporary country' scheme for a barn conversion in Hampshire.

The guiding principle in every Acres Wild design is the use of controlled, simple geometry — an element that is apparent in their plans, but can also be experienced in their gardens. "We sometimes use freeform shapes when we're working up a design and of course, for natural features like waterfalls. But when it comes to how a garden will ultimately feel and the practicalities of how it can be constructed, we always go back to geometry," Smith explains. "This usually takes the form of natural sweeps articulated with formal elements. We're also using 'green architecture' more and more to create geometry and form," he adds.

But clearly, it takes more than geometry to make a design work. "Scale and proportion are so impor-

tant. If they are ignored, designs can appear either imposed or fussy," says Roberts. "Many designers tend to work up a plan at 1:50 but at this scale, there can be an inclination to cram too much in." Instead Roberts and Smith work at 1:200, or even 1:500, and use thumbnail sketches to develop the design. "It's a good discipline to have so that designs stay pared back and do not get bogged down with detail," she continues. This helps them keep their designs in proportion to the space, while also relating back to the human scale. "How the space is used and how it feels is fundamental to every design," she adds.

Roberts and Smith run their projects individually, but they have developed such a synergistic way of



working over the years that many of their schemes look as though they could have been created by either designer. "All our designs are Acres Wild designs, which is how we prefer it. We always sound each other out so there's a constant dialogue between us," says Roberts. This collaborative attitude began when they worked on student projects together nearly two decades ago; it will be fascinating to see where it takes them in the next two.

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LESSONS FROM TEACHING

Until recently, Acres Wild taught garden design for ten years at various schools including the Inchbald School of Design, London. "Problem-solving and sharing our experience in studio sessions was particularly fulfilling," recalls Roberts. "Ironically, interacting with both students and other practitioners clarified our own thinking and ensured that we never became isolated in what we were doing." Unfortunately, they now have very little time available for teaching.



Far left and left: Plan and photograph from a private house in Surrey. Planting includes *Acer japonicum* 'Aconitifolium', *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus' and *Epimedium x versicolor* 'Sulphureum'. The sense of geometry that underlines most of Acres Wild's schemes is clearly apparent in this project.

Below: This courtyard garden in London received the 2004 Design and Decoration Award for garden design. Planting, hard landscape details and proportion are key elements.

ON THE WEB

Since Acres Wild set up its website in 2001, it has been a powerful source of new business. The practice receives 60 per cent of its work from the website, with the rest coming mainly from referrals by previous clients and colleagues. "Part of the sales tool is there online, so most of the client's decision-making about whether to appoint us is already done before they even make contact," says Smith. "Then it's down to whether our personalities fit."

THE ACRES WILD BUSINESS

Based in Nuthurst, West Sussex, most Acres Wild projects are large country gardens of 0.5ha or more, which are often created in stages and can take two years or more to complete. The practice occasionally designs small urban gardens and last year won the 2004 Design and Decoration Award for garden design for a courtyard garden in Earl's Court, London (see *GDJ* 33). Both designers attend the first client meeting and then one of them takes the project forward — they each run about six or seven projects at a time. Budgets vary widely from £20,000 to £350,000, although most are under £100,000. They charge a nominal fee for the initial consultation and a fixed price for the survey and masterplan. Later stages are charged at an hourly rate and logged on a timesheet.

