

LATE SUMMER does tend to give rise to moments when things just bend. And sag. And then break off. Leaving your whole garden looking stupid. It's at this low moment that the Society of Garden Designers Awards shortlist for 2014 arrives; along with the email come thumbnail images of the shortlisted gardens, which all look like jewels against a Scandinavian-blue backdrop.

Calling in a professional garden designer is one of those things we'll all be doing – when we win the Lottery. Maybe. Off the record and sworn to secrecy, many in the industry have startling tales to tell of clients who have spent millions on the house and who hope to get the garden done, for, ooh, about 20 grand.

Twenty grand might just about do the labour, plants and hard landscaping in a small London back garden, but it won't even cover a terrace, chairs and a table for your Lottery winner's pile. Especially when the to-do list begins with "taking out the swimming pool, which was just completely in the wrong place".

Yet flicking through the gardens picked from the hundreds of entries this year, I can see exactly why people do finally grit their teeth and pay for these particular professional services rendered. Beautifully balanced alleys of trees; glassy pools of water; elegant outdoor eating areas, with swishy connections back and forth into the house; calm, minimalist outdoor fireplaces, increasingly standard in posh exterior designs.

Carefully considered, cleverly hidden lighting is one of the biggest differences between "home-made" gardens and those drawn up on computer by an expert. Choosing to light individual trees, or even a set of antlers, the designer can make you look just where they fancy. Even storage becomes a feature: look closely at these designs and you'll see drawers, cupboards and even bike sheds hidden with great care and skill.

But garden designers see all these elegant accoutrements as a means to an end. "You're trying to make it feel as if it's always been there. But to do that, making

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it look as effortless as possible, you have to put a lot of effort in," explains Ian Smith from Acres Wild, shortlisted this year for his work at Millwater, Surrey.

Effort was certainly put in at Millwater – a large country garden to the west of London. "We worked with the client for five or six years, in total, in a number of phases, and it's a real treat to go back there," says Smith. "They have a really good team of gardeners who look after it; you don't often get a chance to go back and see your work, but when you do, it's really fantastic."

Elsewhere on the shortlist, Cleve West's delightful Horatio's Garden, for a spinal-injury treatment centre in Salisbury, takes up a developing tradition of the Great British therapeutic garden, connecting back to the medieval origins of physic and botanic gardens, but filled with modern life. And Charlotte Rowe,

based in west London, has two projects shortlisted, both for town gardens that have enormous poise and elegance.

Ian Smith's practice partner at Acres Wild, Debbie Roberts, is also shortlisted this year: her courtyard garden in Guernsey uses calm, soft-coloured paving stone to quiet the space, (surrounded on three sides by the higgledy-piggledy stone walls of a traditional cottage house), then fills borders with lush planting to relax the atmosphere.

"When you get a client who understands how you're trying to work with the space, you're walking through an open door," says Roberts, summing up how the relationship between garden designer and client should work.

Here, bleached-wood zig-zag benches run along the edges of an enticing swimming pool; lower garden walls, holding in beds of lavender, cistus and euphorbia, take the same pattern as the walls of the house. And a long summoning path calls the viewer out to a white bench at the edge of a lush meadow. With absolutely not a bend or sag to be seen. •

PHOTOGRAPH by IAN SMITH



Debbie Roberts' shortlisted courtyard garden in Guernsey makes the most of relaxed, lush planting

## GRAND DESIGNS

*Calling in the professionals to create an outdoor space might require a Lottery win – but it ain't half worth it, says EMMA TOWNSEND*