

# Gardens and designers, who needs 'em?

BY DAVID HOPPIT

**W**ell most of us do, actually. Our heritage of gardens and passion for them is as British as bulldogs, but the sad truth is that the gardens of our childhood are dying out. Along with the hedgehog, sparrow and cuckoo they could become extinct.

The gardens described in my dictionaries as “areas of ground surrounding a house devoted to growing flowers, fruit or vegetables” are not the gardens one expects to see at the show house of a modern development.

Years ago my Great Aunt Charlotte had all those things growing in her garden – and she had a chicken house and a run next to the compost heap a good 30 yards from the back door of her ordinary suburban semi-detached house. Such a garden is almost impossible in today’s world.

Add to those the modern requirements of family life – an area for the barbecue and the climbing frame, plus somewhere to sunbathe and to play football – and you will understand the scale of the problem facing house builders, garden designers and landscape architects.

That is why this newspaper is, for the fourth year running, supporting the New Homes Garden Awards, a nationwide competition that rewards house builders, developers and the garden and landscape industries for excellence in the design of gardens and landscapes great and small.

Whether or not the government is forced to loosen a couple of notches on the Green Belt in the coming months, some way must be found to build many thousands more homes, especially in the already overcrowded south east.

Every day we hear exclamations of doom and despair, mostly from people already comfortably accommodated. The cry goes up: “House builders want to concrete over the countryside”, which is actually very unfair to builders. They don’t “WANT” to build on green fields, but they are required to build somewhere.

The fact is that a properly designed development (and I emphasise the word ‘properly’) can be a good deal ‘greener’ than a sterile field of rape, corn or cabbages. My

concern is for the comfort and convenience of the human occupants, but equally for the creatures with which we share our green and pleasant land.

However, with more and more of us living in ‘luxury apartments’ there is huge scope for house builders using the talents of designers, to create breathtaking communal gardens that are a delight for human occupants and also for our dwindling wildlife. A garden without bees, butterflies and birdsong is surely not a garden.



David Keegan Garden Design

The ineluctable consequence of this wave of house building is a considerable reduction in the size of individual plots, so garden designers and house builders working together have to meet that challenge. The 200 or 300 square feet that are set aside for gardens today are now considered to be “outside rooms”.

Two of the most popular areas at this year’s Chelsea Flower Show were the courtyard gardens and, in the marquee, a new display devoted to roof terraces. The diversity of design and potential for fun in these small areas seemed almost limitless.

Small areas can be productive too. Back in the late 1990s I interviewed an actor who reckoned he was self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables from the raised beds on his roof terrace atop London’s Barbican; and because of the altitude he had no problems with aphids and other pests.

He didn’t have a beehive, but newsreader Bill Turnbull told me at the British Beekeepers’ Association stand at Chelsea that people with town gardens and even roof terraces could keep honey bees. Now there’s a thought for next years competition!

It was perhaps not surprising therefore

that of the 28 categories the distinguished panel of judges scrutinised at the Express offices recently the most numerous entries were for small gardens and roof terraces.

The judging panel were all recognised experts in their field drawn from the Society of Garden Designers, Landscape Institute, Garden Design Journal, Home Builders Federation and National House Builders Council.

Also well supported were the slightly more esoteric designs in the retirement development categories – two of the most hotly contested groups and certainly the most difficult to judge.

Generally speaking the standard of entries was good – a deal better than four years ago, that’s for sure. There is still huge scope for improvement, however – quite a lot in some categories.

The entries were as diverse as the range of plants now available to designers, although judges had seen a few too many phormiums and cordylines and too few woodbine and jasminum angulare by the time they had completed their labours.

Entries were received from TV garden presenters and there was even a house with a flower meadow for a roof. Many smaller plots dispensed with lawns, preferring gravel, paving and the useful and much maligned decking. Lawns if they were used, were small, leading us to believe that lawn mowers, if needed at all, will evolve into small Hoover sized implements.

There were also “entries” from garden designers of old, in the garden restoration categories.

These amazing glimpses back to the great days when horticulture and architecture were familiar bedfellows, included one by Gertrude Jekyll, the myopic old lady who formed such a creative bond with architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.

Now, that’s a hard act to follow but a lesson from the past of just how successful collaboration can be. Is it too much to ask of a modern garden designer and today’s house builders? We have every confidence.

The award winners will be announced at the celebrity hosted presentation lunch on Friday 28th September at the Royal Garden Hotel, Kensington. Visit [www.newhomesgardenawards.co.uk](http://www.newhomesgardenawards.co.uk)



Octagon



Catherine Thomas



Sunrise Senior Living

## AWARD WINNERS SHORT-LIST

ALMANZORA GROUP  
 BARRATT HOMES  
 BEECHCROFT  
 CATHERINE THOMAS  
 CHURCHILL RETIREMENT  
 -LIVING  
 CITY & COUNTRY  
 CLAGUE  
 COUNTRYSIDE  
 CROUDACE HOMES

DAVID KEEGAN  
 EXCELSIOR HOMES  
 FISHER TOMLIN  
 GEORGE WIMPEY  
 JONES HOMES  
 KEARY COLES  
 KENMORE HOMES  
 MCCARTHY & STONE  
 MODULAR GARDEN  
 NEWHALL

OCTAGON  
 PERSIMMON HOMES  
 PLANET GARDEN  
 RETIREMENT VILLAGES  
 SEDDON HOMES  
 ST GEORGE  
 SUNRISE SENIOR LIVING  
 TC LANDSCAPES  
 TRY HOMES  
 URBAN SPLASH